

Chapter One

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

He'd been dreaming of it since the defeat of Voldemort. The Veil, that is. The one that Sirius had fallen behind. The last time he'd dreamed about the Department of Mysteries, Sirius had died. The world had also finally woken up to the truth about Voldemort, but the price had been too high for him to be grateful. And once the truth was out, the attacks had gotten worse.

He wondered, briefly, why he was there. Ginny was at home, she was pregnant, she needed him. Yet he could not seem to stay away. Voldemort was gone, true. But then, so were so many other people, good people, who should not have died.

He counted the steps until he was standing right in front of where Sirius had fallen through. Cedric. Sirius. Dumbledore. Hedwig. Moody. Dobby. Tonks father. Remus. Colin Creevy. Tonks. Snape. Fred. Hell, even Crabbe didn't deserve to die then. There were more, many more, but none of them close to him. They were close to somebody, though. Maybe that was why he couldn't stay away. Why he couldn't look away. Why, even at that very moment, he couldn't walk away.

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Harry awoke with a start. He was lying on a floor, covered by a poor excuse for a blanket, and someone appeared to be attempting to break the door down.

"Where's the cannon?" Dudley asked. Dudley?! Where had the Veil sent him? Could this be when Hagrid first told him about Hogwarts? It must be, because he couldn't recall any other time where he and Dudley had been sleeping in what appeared to be a shack.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room, holding a rifle. Harry snorted. Like that would do any good against HAGRID. His uncle didn't seem to know that, though, and shouted "Who's there? I warn you-I'm armed!"

Although it did occur to Harry that when people were trying to break in, it can generally be assumed that they are probably armed as well. And as if they didn't know that a wizard had come for Harry. Who else COULD even get across in this weather, not to mention who else would even bother?

SMASH! The door flew clean off its hinges and landed on the floor with a thunderous crash. Hagrid stood in the doorway, looking very impressive.

Now, Harry hadn't exactly planned this, but he figured that he might as well make the best of it. Things hadn't exactly turned out terribly when he had taken down Voldemort, but they also hadn't been all that great. Maybe he was getting a second chance. And if that was the case, there was no way in hell he wasn't going to take it.

"Couldn't make a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey..." Hagrid began. And completely ruined his frightening first impression. He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat, petrified. "Budge up, yeh great lump," he told him, watching as Dudley ran to go hide behind his mother, who was in turn hiding behind her husband. "An' here's Harry! Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby. Yeh look a lot like yeh dad, buy yeh've got yer mum's eyes."

"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" Uncle Vernon demanded, making a funny rasping noise. "You are breaking and entering!"

"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune." Harry grinned. He had been much too confused to enjoy Hagrid's verbal throw down of his Uncle the last time around. When Hagrid reached over and turned the gun into a pretzel, Harry's grin only grew wider.

"Anyway," Hagrid said, turning his attention back to Harry as though people regularly went around turning deadly weapons into the shapes of tasty snack food. "Harry-a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here-I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right." He pulled out a cake that said 'Happy Birthday Harry' written on it in green icing.

"Why, thank you," Harry said gratefully, accepting the cake. He did wish, though, that Hagrid hadn't used a Slytherin color, even if it did match his eyes. "You seem to know me, but if, as you said, we haven't seen each other since I was a baby, perhaps you could be so kind as to introduce yourself?" Harry asked politely.

Hagrid chuckled. "O' course, o' course. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts." And with that, he shook Harry's arm up and down. "What about that tea then, eh? I'd not say no ter summat strong if yeh've got it, mind."

"I'm sorry, we left in rather a hurry, so we don't have anything to drink," Harry said apologetically.

"S'alright, I've got summat here." Hagrid said, turning towards the fireplace and then back once he got a roaring fire going. He then proceeded to pull a good dozen or so things out of his coat pockets.

Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley."

Hagrid chuckled darkly. "Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' any more, Dursley, don' worry."

Hagrid passed Harry the sausages and he thanked him cordially for his thoughtfulness, then decided that it would be suspicious to just accept this and so asked Hagrid for more details.

"Call me Hagrid, everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts - yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course."

Harry nodded. "Of course."

Uncle Vernon's eyes bulged. "YOU DO?"

"Yes," Harry answered calmly.

"But how? We were always so careful not to let you get any dangerous ideas! How'd you hear about all this wizarding nonsense?"

"Now wait jus' one second!" Hagrid thundered, leaping to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys cowered against the wall. "Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that you told this boy - this boy - nothin' abou' - about ANYTHING?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head ruefully. "They didn't."

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

"DURSLEY!" he boomed.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like 'Mimblewimble'.

"But-but if Daddy didn't tell Harry anything, how does he know?" Dudley asked, speaking up for the first time from behind his mother.

Hagrid looked expectantly at Harry.

"Fair point," Harry admitted. "Well, it's just that people have spent the last ten years following me around and shaking my hand and bowing to me, generally just appearing very honored to meet me and eventually you pick some things up."

"'s not enough to 'pick thin's up,' Harry. You've got to know."

"But I do know," Harry countered. "About Hogwarts, about my parents, about Voldemort..."

Hagrid shuddered. "Don' say tha' name!"

Harry shrugged. "Old habits die hard. Although if I ever go camping again, I'll make sure to take your advice. Well, will be heading to Diagon Alley tomorrow?"

"O' course," Hagrid nodded.

"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.

Harry might have known Uncle Vernon would insist on provoking Hagrid. Quick as a flash, he'd brought his umbrella, containing the pieces of his wand, swishing down through the air to point at Dudley.

A flash of violet light, loud boom, and pig squeal later, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned around, Harry could see the curly pig's tail poking a hole through the back of his pants.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.

"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do."

He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm - er - not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff - one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job -"

"Of course not," Harry assured him. "It's getting late, so we should probably turn in."

"Right you are, Harry," Hagrid agreed. "We've got lots ter do tomorrow. Gotta get up ter town, get al yer books and all that." He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry. "You can kip under that," he said. "Don't mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' dormice in one o' the pockets."

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Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

It was a dream, he told himself firmly. I dreamt I was back to when Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a Hogwarts. When I open my eyes I'll be at home with Ginny.

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

And there's Hedwig Jr. knocking on the window, Harry thought, relieved, still not getting up.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"All right," Harry mumbled, "I'm getting up."

He sat up and Hagrid's heavy coat fell off him.

The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa and there was an owl rapping its claw on the window, a newspaper held in its beak.

Harry's heart sank. It hadn't been a dream after all. He quickly paid the owl and handed the Daily Prophet to Hagrid. He then listened patiently as the half-giant explained to him about Gringotts. Then they got into the Dursley's boat and headed off towards London and Diagon Alley.

Leaving the Dursley's to fend for themselves. Realized Harry with malicious glee. He knew they'd get home before he would and besides, it really served them right.

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All too soon they were in the Leaky Cauldron. As before, everyone was very eager to shake his hand.

Eventually, a pale young man made his way to Harry, his left eye twitching something terrible.

"Professor Quirrell!" said Hagrid. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts."

"P-P-Potter," stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "c-can't t-tell you how p-pleased I am to meet you."

Harry briefly wondered how he could stand touching him, but realized he must not have been possessed yet. Probably wouldn't be until he failed to secure the stone. He also wondered why in the world he felt the need to stutter the whole year. He could appear perfectly innocent (especially compared to the likes of Severus Snape) just fine without it, and quite frankly it was annoying. Besides, according to Snape's memory, Dumbledore had been onto Quirrell from the beginning.

He supposed that Hagrid neglected to mention that this was Quirrell's first year teaching so as not to freak him out with the DADA job curse. He decided to bring that up.

"So how long have you been teaching?" he inquired.

"W-w-well, actually, th-this is m-m-my f-first year, but I'm v-very excited," Quirrell said, looking a bit sheepish.

"What subject do you teach?" Harry asked, knowing the answer perfectly well, but that was just the sort of question people asked their future teachers.

"D-Defence Against the D-D-Dark Arts," muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he'd rather not think about it.

Yes, Quirrell, and his master, Voldemort, would probably be MUCH happier without such pesky things as defenses against the Dark Arts being taught.

"N-not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?" he laughed nervously. "You'll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I've g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself." He looked terrified at the very thought. Harry marveled when he thought about the fact that this was the very first person he could remember trying to kill him.

The other patrons of the bar quickly interrupted and it took nearly ten minutes for Hagrid to extricate Harry from his throng of admirers.

Things progressed pretty much the same from then on, until it was time to go to Madam Malkin's to get his uniform.

When Harry went inside, he froze. He'd almost forgotten about his first meeting with Draco Malfoy, here before either of them knew anything about the path that was chosen for the other. Because they were archrivals. Before he found out that Draco, though undoubtedly unpleasant, wasn't evil and had more-or-less redeemed himself.

Hm, Harry thought. Could be fun.

"Hello," said Draco. "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," Harry nodded.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said Malfoy. He had the same bored, drawling voice at eleven as he did at twenty-three.

"Not much point of that until you get there, though, right?" Harry asked.

"True, but she needs something to do while I'm in here. After that I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see why first-years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

"They probably won't check the luggage, so if you just shrink it, you can carry it in and then unshrink it once you're there. Of course, you'd have to claim it belonged to an older student if anyone asked, but that shouldn't be too difficult," Harry suggested.

Draco looked at Harry approvingly. "That just might work. I'd have to learn how to unshrink things, but until then I could get an older student to do that, as well. Say, have you got your own broom?"

"Not at the moment," Harry answered, noncommittally.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"Of course, I'm seeker. You?"

"Same. Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. Know what house you'll be in yet?"

"I think I'd like to be in Gryffindor. I hear they have the best parties."

"Well, that's okay, if you're into that sort of thing. I'm going to be in Slytherin, all our family has been there-"

"Well, that's okay, if you're into that sort of thing," Harry interrupted and he could've sworn he saw Draco's mouth twitch upwards.

"Imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

"Well, maybe not LEAVE...that's a bit drastic, but I'd definitely defect. I mean, Hufflepuff sounds like a brand of marshmallows or pillows or something."

This time he knew he wasn't imagining it. Draco Malfoy, fighting a smile because of something he, Harry Potter, had said. He never thought he'd see the day! This actually was sort of fun. Why weren't they friends again?

"I say, look at that man!" Harry turned to where Draco was pointing and saw Hagrid standing outside the window, grinning at Harry and pointing to two large ice-creams to show that he couldn't come in.

"That's Hagrid. He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh, I've heard of him. He's sort of a servant, isn't he?" Oh. That's why.

"He's the gamekeeper."

"Yes, exactly," Draco nodded impatiently.

"No, not exactly, there's a difference between a gamekeeper and a servant. Maybe not a profound difference, but it'd definitely something

that any Manor Lord should know," Harry said, knowing full well that Draco would inherit Malfoy Manor someday. He was pleased to note Draco's ears were pink.

"I heard he's a sort of savage-lives in a hut in the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic and ends up setting fire to his bed."

"Well," Harry said, remembering how Hagrid had carried him back to Hogwarts when Voldemort had nearly killed him and struggling to keep his temper. "I'd wager a guess that it's a bit difficult to do magic when drunk under the best of circumstances. And not everyone can live in Manors. If they did, then it wouldn't be so special, now would it, and people would have to find new ways to flaunt their wealth."

Draco nodded, considering. "You're right, I never thought I'd say this, but the Hagrid's of the world are needed to contrast with the right sort of people." Now, Harry knew exactly what he meant by 'the right sort of people,' but pretended he didn't to avoid a scene. "Hey, is he with you?"

"Yes," Harry said simply.

"Why? Where are your parents?"

"Godric's Hollow."

"Why didn't they come with you, then?" Draco pressed.

"Well, they would have, but Voldemort killed them, see," Harry explained.

Draco's eyes widened. "You said the Dark Lord's name!"

Harry nodded. "Yes. Yes I did."

Draco didn't seem to be able to think of anything to say to that, so instead he asked, "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes. "If they weren't, why would Voldemort bother with them personally? He was rather busy and important near the end, or so I hear, and had other people to kill Muggles for him."

"I really don't think they should let Muggleborns in, do you? They're just not the same; they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine."

"Well, I don't think it's not having heard of Hogwarts that should concern you, per say, as much as they haven't heard about magic or know anything about our culture," Harry said, not really answering the question.

"Yes, that's exactly why I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your last name, anyway?"

Before Harry could answer, Madam Malkins said, "That's you done my dear." Harry briefly wondered why he was done first when he had come in after Draco, but decided not to dwell on it.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," Draco said.

"Later. See if you can guess my last name by then and tell me on the train."

"I will," Draco said, suddenly determined.

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Shortly after that, Harry and Hagrid had purchased all of Harry's supplies and he was back with the Dursley's. The last month wasn't so bad. His Aunt and Uncle mostly ignored him and Dudley ran from the room screaming when he saw him. It wasn't so bad, really, as he had had plenty of experience with people ignoring and/or fearing him in his first year, second year, fourth year, and fifth year for getting caught after getting rid of Norbert, being a Parselmouth, being the fourth champion, and being a lying schizophrenic, respectively.

One thing he did do was make sure he memorized his potion's textbook. He was not taking ANY chances there. Snape may have loved his mother, but he sure as hell hated him until he died.

On the last day of August, Harry went down to the living room and cleared his throat, watching with some amusement as Dudley screamed and ran from the room. Harry supposed that that was what happened when Dudley's parents encouraged him to make Harry's life miserable and kept him in the dark about Harry having magical powers. "Um-Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

"I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to go to Hogwarts." Another grunt. "Would it be alright if you gave me a lift?" Grunt. "Thank you."

"Funny way to get to a wizards' school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?"

"No, but they're illegal in Britain, and I doubt they'd trust us to go straight to school and not let ourselves be seen if we each had one. Not to mention how expensive it would be..."

"Where is this school, anyway?"

"Scotland," Harry replied.

"Can you be any more specific?" Uncle Vernon asked.

"Planning on coming up for Family Day?"

Aunt Petunia looked horrified. "They have Family Day now?"

"All right, we'll take you to King's Cross. We're going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn't bother."

"Great," Harry said and left. To think-only one more day and he'd be back at Hogwarts. And...he'd get to see Ginny, too, if only briefly.

Yes, things might just work out after all, if he could keep his temper this time around and not alienate the press and the Ministry.

Oh boy. This was going to be a LONG seven years.

Chapter Two

Note: I'm a bit concerned that I made Fred and George seem too gullible here, but I think they'd view Harry as an 'ickle firstie' who couldn't possibly be trying to pull one over on them. Not to mention its some juicy gossip.

Other Note: And has anyone ever wondered why exactly the Weasley's don't talk to their accountant relative?

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. In case anyone was living under a rock.

"Well, there you are, boy," Uncle Vernon said, a nasty grin on his face. "Platform nine-platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're some kind of moron, you know that? And no, I wouldn't recommend trying anything in front of all these witnesses," Harry said casually as he watched his Uncle's face begin to purple. He figured he was reasonably safe saying anything he wanted to him seeing as how he wouldn't see him for nine whole months. "Of course they don't have the platform be obvious; it's a train for wizard children with wizard items that would attract far too much attention."

"Then where is it, boy?" Vernon spat.

"You just walk right through the portal. I know it looks like a brick wall, but I assure you it's not. How is that possible, you ask? MAGIC. In fact, you can come with me, if you like, and see it for yourself," Harry suggested.

Uncle Vernon looked like he was about to lunge at Harry, but Harry just nodded towards the local constable who was standing not twenty feet away and Uncle Vernon reluctantly backed down. "You'll pay for that, boy," he whispered menacingly and then walked back to his car. As they drove away, Harry saw Dudley and Aunt Petunia laughing; clearly his Uncle had lied about the encounter.

Now, Harry was fully aware of the fact that antagonizing his Uncle was probably not the best plan, but he had stood up to people a hundred times more intimidating than the likes of Vernon Dursley and so he wasn't about to just cower as he would have when he was really eleven. Harry could basically write off any chance off improving relations with his Uncle, but the rest of his family were a different story.

He knew that his Aunt Petunia had once loved her sister and was more scared of what Harry's presence would mean in terms of her family's safety and jealous that Lily had always been the favorite. More than fifteen years of resentment would be hard to overcome, but Harry had always hated summer and the fact that he never had anything to do, so he may as well try that. Dudley was another avenue that Harry could pursue. Granted at this point in time he was little more than a spoiled bully, but he did eventually come to accept Harry after the Dementor incident. He wasn't quite sure how he could speed up a reconciliation with Dudley, but it might be worth looking into. It would definitely make life at Privet Drive more peaceful, that was for sure.

"-packed with Muggles, of course-

Harry looked up abruptly as he heard Mrs. Weasley's voice. He quickly hurried after them.

"Now, what's the platform number?" Molly asked. Harry wondered briefly how in the world she managed to forget the platform number since she'd been doing this for God knows how many years.

"Nine and three-quarters!" Ginny piped up. "Mum, can't I go..." Harry couldn't help but grin. While they were both currently way too young for him to be having any romantic thoughts about her, she was still a cute kid.

When all the Hogwarts-bound Weasley's save Ron had gone through, Harry approached them.

"Excuse me," Harry said.

"Hello, dear. First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new, too," Molly said kindly.

"Yes," Harry nodded before turning to Ron. "Hi, my name's Harry Potter."

As he anticipated, the reaction was immediate. Ron's eyes immediately flew to his forehead and Ginny started squealing. Well, at least this way she wouldn't complain about not seeing him, though watching the love of his life act like a fangirl was somewhat irritating.

"Are you really?" Ron asked.

"Are you really Ron?" Harry asked.

"Of course I am," Ron said, looking confused. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I could say the same to you," Harry replied.

"But...but I can't believe that you'd be Harry Potter!"

Harry shrugged. "Well, I suppose someone has to be, right?" he said, casually brushing his hair out of his eyes and revealing the most famous scar in the history of magic. "So anyway, I was wondering if you could help me find the platform?" he asked, turning back to Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley, whose eyes had filled with tears upon finding out who Harry was (probably because such a polite boy had had such a tragic life and at such a young age, too), nodded. "Of course, dear. All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now before Ron."

Harry thanked her for her help and walked through the platform. Harry looked around, smiling a little at the sight of everyone so much younger than the last time he saw them.

Suddenly, one of the Weasley twins approached him. “Want a hand?” he asked. Unfortunately, Harry had no idea which one it was, as he had never been able to tell them apart to begin with and George had lost his ear the summer after his sixth year and then Fred had died so he never really got an opportunity, even after he had married into the family.

“Thanks,” Harry replied.

“Oy, Fred! C’mere and help!” Okay, now Harry was reasonably sure that Fred was the one who had approached him. After all, the twins never actually referred to themselves by their proper names, as apparently that was for ‘lesser pranksters.’

Once the twins helped him, he again brushed his hair out of his eyes, this time more because the effort of lifting his school trunks (he should probably put a charm on it to lighten it) than because he had any great need to reveal himself to people who would hear him announced to everybody at his sorting soon enough. It was strange, though, to see George with two ears again. To see Fred ALIVE again. His heart constricted briefly and he tried to imagine how it’d be to see some of the other people he’d lost. Especially Sirius, who was still in Azkaban.

“What’s that?” George asked. Now that Harry had a good idea as to which one had first approached him, he knew that he’d be able to tell them apart—at least until they left his line of sight. Apparently Bill was the only one who had been consistently able to tell them apart, hence he was their favorite sibling. Well, Bill and Percy, but the latter was far too uptight to ever be idolized by the Weasley twins.

“Blimey,” said Fred. “Are you-?”

“He is,” George confirmed. Harry couldn’t help but notice how surreal it was that the Weasley twins were, for once, NOT finishing each other’s sentences. Hm. No matter how well they knew each other, that must be pretty difficult. Were they Legilimens? “Aren’t you?”

“Well, I’m seriously confused, if that’s what you mean,” Harry told them.

"Harry Potter," chorused the twins.

"Nope," Harry said cheerfully.

"You're not?" Fred asked, bemused.

"No, I'm not. Have you ever met him?" Harry asked.

"Well, no, but—" George began.

"Then what makes you think I'm him?" Harry demanded.

"Well, you've got a scar," Fred offered.

"So does Dumbledore, are you going to go accusing him of being Potter next?"

"Of course not!" George said, looking thoughtful. "Filch, on the other hand..."

"So who are you then, if you're not Harry Potter?" Fred asked skeptically. "And why do you have a lightning bolt scar on your forehead?"

"Well, after that nasty little incident with the Dark Lord, my mother decided that lightning bolt scars were 'in' and shot a cutting curse at me." Harry paused. "At least, that's the official story. I think that was before my father had the courage to be cut off for three months by telling her that maybe she should leave the cooking to the house elves." Fred and George just stared at him. "Hey, don't judge! And I'm Draco Malfoy, by the way." He peered at them suspiciously. "You ARE Purebloods, right?"

Wordlessly, Fred nodded.

George found his voice first. "YOU'RE Draco Malfoy?"

"You have a problem with that?" Harry crossed his arms.

"No, but...aren't your parents blonde?" he asked.

"Your point being?"

"How can two blonde people have a black-haired son?" George asked reasonably.

"No, my mother was not having a very public affair with Severus Snape, how dare you even suggest that!" Harry screeched.

Fred held up his hands. "Calm down, he didn't mean to offend you."

"Well he did," Harry sniffed. "In fact, I'm going to write to father right now."

"Isn't he still at the platform?" George asked, perplexed.

"Yes he is, but actually talking to your relatives is for half-bloods," and with that Harry stormed off, wondering how on earth he had managed to keep a straight face through that entire exchange. One thing he knew, though, was that he definitely would have the twins' respect after they realized he'd tricked them.

"Hey, Mum, guess what. Guess who we just met on the train," Harry heard Fred say.

"Who?" Molly asked.

"Draco Malfoy!"

"That's nothing, I met Harry Potter," Ginny told him, still sounding awestruck.

"Why'd you want to meet a git like him anyway?" Ron asked.

"Meeting him wasn't the interesting part," George explained.

"Then what was?" Ron asked.

"Apparently his mum and Snape were having an affair and he's the by-product!" Fred exclaimed.

"WHAT?!" Molly asked. This is much better gossip than last year's 'Albus Dumbledore was madly in love with Gellert Grindelwald.' Honestly, you'd think Rita Skeeter would learn to stop making up such sensational stories. Obviously Dumbledore was struck speechless by the blatant lies and thus couldn't be bothered to deny it.

"It's true, he practically admitted it," George confirmed.

"I've got to go find Andromeda," Mrs. Weasley muttered. "Be good kids!" And with that she hurried away, Ginny trailing along behind her and casting longing looks back at the Express.

"Anyone sitting here?" Ron asked.

"Nope, go ahead," Harry invited.

"Hey, Ron," George said, entering their compartment. "Listen, we're going down the—Why are you sitting with Malfoy?"

"Malfoy?" Ron looked confused. "You mean him?" he gestured to Harry.

Fred nodded.

"But that's not Malfoy, that's Harry Potter," Ron explained.

"What?!" Fred asked. "But...but you told us you were Draco Malfoy."

Harry shrugged. "What can I say? Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy...Sometimes I get confused."

"George, I think we've been pranked," George said.

"Are first years allowed to do that?" Fred wondered. "Does that mean that what you said about Snape's not true either?"

"It might be," Harry said neutrally. "Feel free to spread the rumor in any event."

Both twins' eyes lit up at this and they ran off down the hall. Harry felt slightly guilty for doing this when he was planning on making a sincere effort to not make Draco Malfoy his arch-nemesis (because honestly, if he really wanted one that badly, there was always Voldemort), but then decided that since Draco had spread that same rumor about his mother and Snape, turnabout was fair play.

"You're my hero," Ron blurted out.

"Because of my facial disfigurement?" Harry asked.

"No, because you pranked Fred and George," Ron explained. At Harry's incredulous look, he hastened to add, "But your scar's pretty cool, too."

"Yeah, it was really considerate of Voldemort to give me such a wicked-looking scar when he attempted to brutally murder me as an infant," Harry said dryly.

Ron just stared at him, fascinated and a little horrified. "You really shouldn't say his name, you know."

"You know, the more people tell me that, the less likely I am to actually listen to them," Harry remarked casually.

Ron looked torn between the desire to impress upon Harry the importance of not saying Tom Riddle's silly little pseudonym and asking more about the night the two had met for the first time. "Do you remember it?"

"You do realize I was fifteen-months-old at the time, right?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I know!" Ron defended, although his tone of voice indicated that he didn't seem to really grasp that Harry was far too young to have even properly remembered the event, much less actually play some secret

part in Voldemort's downfall. "I just thought that you might remember because of the scar."

Now it was Harry's turn to stare. "You know, I'm starting to think that you people don't actually know anything about the way that scars work," he said, remembering how everyone had thought that his scar made him a lying schizophrenic fifth year.

"What do you mean 'you people'?" Ron asked.

"You know, wizards," Harry explained.

"But you're a wizard," Ron pointed out.

"Yes, but I was raised by Muggles," Harry explained.

"What does that matter?" Ron asked.

Harry smiled at Ron's inability to comprehend why it would matter. He was so innocent back then... "Muggles don't have magic and as such are forced to be much more sensible."

"Oh." Ron paused and looked expectantly at Harry.

Harry sighed. "And to answer your question, yes, a little."

"What do you remember?" Ron asked eagerly. That was the annoying part about Ron being so innocent; he tended to have the tact of a troll. He'd gotten much better at not asking such painful questions such as what he remembered about the first time someone attempted to kill him after he'd started dating Hermione.

"Well," Harry said, trying to piece together all the flashes he'd seen over the years. "I remember someone who I assume is my father telling my mother to take me and go. Then there's laughing, someone who I assume is my mother begging Voldemort to spare my life, he tells her to stand aside and let him kill me, she says no and asks him to kill her instead, he does, then there's a lot of green light and my forehead felt like it was on fire," Harry explained.

Now Ron looked horrified. "I'm sorry, mate, I didn't think—"

"It's okay," Harry cut him off. He really SHOULD have thought, but then again, he was only eleven and, knowing Molly Weasley, living the most sheltered life imaginable. "Are all your family wizards?" Harry asked, quickly changing the subject.

"Er – yes, I think so," said Ron. "I think Mum's got a second cousin who's an accountant, but we never talk about him."

Harry froze. He couldn't believe he'd never realized that the first time around, but to be fair, he was only a child at the time. "Why not?"

Ron looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"Your accountant cousin, is he magical?"

"No," Ron replied, still not getting it.

"Is that why you don't talk about him?" Harry asked.

"Er..." Clearly Ron had never thought about WHY they pretended they didn't have a Squib relative. Just like how the Dursely's liked to pretend that they didn't have a wizard nephew. If the Weasley's of all people could succumb to Pureblood prejudices like that, no wonder Voldemort's only real opposition came from vigilante groups who functioned more like Albus Dumbledore's personal cult in his quest to atone for helping Grindelwald all those years ago. Still, the fact that Ron had never realized that his lack of magic was the reason they ignored their cousin was to his credit, and so Harry supposed he couldn't really take his frustration with the sorry state of the wizarding world where everyone was prejudiced against everyone out on him. Not to mention that it would completely destroy any chance they'd have of being friends.

--

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," Hermione said, entering the compartment, Neville trailing behind her.

"No, but you could always summon it," Harry suggested.

"I don't know the spell for that," Hermione admitted, sounding embarrassed that she didn't know how to do a spell that they didn't teach for several more years.

"Here, I'll do it," Harry volunteered and took out his wand. "Accio Neville's toad!"

Nothing happened for a moment and Hermione looked doubtfully at him. "Are you sure that's a real spell?"

Harry nodded. Oh, he was sure all right.

"Well, it's not very good, is—" but she was interrupted as Trevor flew through the door. "Oh!"

Ron looked over at Harry, surprised. "If you knew how to summon his toad, why didn't you do it the first time he was here?"

Because he'd wanted to see Hermione again and hopefully make a better first impression? "I guess I didn't think of it," Harry lied.

"I've tired a few simple spells, too, just for practice, and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise, but I was so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the best school of witchcraft there is."

"Then isn't it convenient that it just happens to be the one geographically closest to wear we live?" Harry muttered.

Hermione gave him a Look. "I've learnt all our set books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough – I'm Hermione Granger by the way, who are you?"

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron finally managed to say after staring blankly at her for three whole minutes.

"Harry Potter," Harry told her.

“Are you really?” Hermione asked, curiously.

“What is it with people not having faith that I know my own name?” Harry asked Neville, who just shrugged. “And Hermione, I didn’t know that I was a wizard until I got my letter, because my relatives refuse to acknowledge that magic exists, and Ron was telling me that there are plenty of Muggle-borns around, so I’m sure you’ll be fine. Besides, I doubt that anyone else actually bothered to memorize all of the textbooks, so I think that not only is it enough, you’re way ahead of everyone else.”

“Really?” Hermione perked up.

“Really,” Harry confirmed. “Although, I did memorize our Potions textbook,” he admitted.

Ron looked horrified at the thought of his potential best friend being a bookworm and scooted closer to Neville.

“But that’s just because I heard that our teacher hated my dad and I don’t want to give him a reason to hate me,” Harry quickly added. Not, of course, like Snape would need a reason, but at least he wouldn’t embarrass him now with his first day surprise questions. Harry probably could have just looked up those specific questions, but then Snape might get mad and ask him some more. Not to mention that it’d been years since his first class with Snape and he honestly didn’t even remember what the questions were or how many of them there were.

“Oh, that’s okay then,” Ron said, relaxing.

“You’re in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, you know,” Hermione told him.

“Well, I wouldn’t believe everything you read,” Harry told her, a bit uncomfortable.

“Why not?” Hermione asked.

"Because by this time tomorrow, the Daily Prophet AND Witch Weekly will have probably run a story on how Draco Malfoy is Narcissa Malfoy and Severus Snape's love child," Harry told her.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Hermione frowned. "Who are—"

"Don't worry about it," Harry told her. "You'll find out soon enough."

"I guess I should be going, now that you found Trevor," Hermione said, getting up, Neville reluctantly following suit.

Ron, being eleven, didn't notice that they obviously wanted to stay, but Harry did and his heart went out to his past and future friends. "Hey, why don't you guys stay a while? We've got way too much food; we need some help eating it."

Hermione beamed and sat right back down again.

"Thanks, Harry," Neville said quietly.

A short while later, Draco Malfoy entered the compartment.

"Neville Longbottom," he proclaimed proudly.

"Uh, yes?" Neville asked, surprised.

"Not you," Draco told him. "Him," he said, pointing at Harry.

"Sorry," Harry told him. "But that's Neville."

"Oh. Was I close?" he asked hopefully.

"How could you be close? I'm either a Longbottom or I'm not. Which, for the record, I'm not."

"Well, you could be related to him," Draco pointed out.

Harry snorted. "I probably am, due to all the inbreeding."

Draco chose to ignore that, partly because he wanted to find out who Harry was (as he had most likely spent the past month obsessing about it) and partly because it was true. “Then who are you?”

“That’s Harry Potter,” Hermione said helpfully.

Draco laughed. “No, really, who is he?”

Harry simply lifted his bangs up.

“Wow, you ARE Harry Potter,” Draco said, sounding a little astonished.

“Yep,” Harry said, vaguely recalling something from his first time around. “Weren’t people talking about that?”

“Well, yes,” Draco admitted. “But they were also spewing the most ridiculous story about my being Professor Snape’s lovechild.”

“Really?” Harry asked innocently. “Wow, I guess people will believe anything.”

“But Harry,” Hermione looked puzzled. “Didn’t you already-”

“Know that people will believe anything?” Neville, surprisingly, cut her off; having figured out that Harry had started the rumor. “Yeah, he did, but he’s been a celebrity for years, so I suppose he would have.”

“You’re Draco Malfoy then?” Ron sniggered, his eleven-year-old maturity level finding the new rumor about him hilarious.

Fortunately, Draco misinterpreted Ron’s amusement. “Think my name’s funny, do you?” Or perhaps not so fortunately. “No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasley’s have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford.”

“Wow, that’s oddly specific,” Harry remarked. “I take it that your fathers’ know each other? And are probably not on the best terms?”

Draco nodded. "You'd be right, Potter. You'll soon find out that some wizarding families are much better than others. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

Harry groaned inwardly. It was like Malfoy was trying to become his enemy or something. Not, of course, that Harry could possibly consider an eleven-year-old boy his enemy, but he knew that his school years would go a LOT smoother with one less person out to destroy him. How to best handle this? He couldn't shake Malfoy's hand, of course, but that would give him the wrong idea AND alienate everyone else in the compartment. But how could he NOT shake it and still get out of a pointless seven-year rivalry?

Finally, he said, "I'm sure you could, Draco, but the thing is, I'm still new to this whole 'Magic is real' thing and so I'm not sure if I could really make an informed choice at the moment. You wouldn't want me to pick Ron just because we bonded over candy and you thought I was Neville, do you?"

Draco considered. "I guess not."

"And besides, I'd really, REALLY like to at least make it to school before alienating anyone," Harry said diplomatically. "So maybe at some point I'll decide that you're right, Ron is the root of all evil, and take you up on your offer of help. Maybe not. But in the meantime, I still need to figure out which of you is right." Bull, he knew exactly who was right and who he would ultimately choose if either Malfoy or Ron forced his hand. But it was a pretty reasonable thing for someone who barely knew either of them to say.

"Alright," Draco agreed reluctantly. "But you'll soon see that I'm right." And with that he left, the bridge unburnt.

Review please!

Chapter Three

Note: While, of course, the whole point of Time-Travel stories is that Harry (or whoever, but usually Harry) gets to do things better based on his knowledge of the future, I don't want him to remember every little detail (such as, say, which bottle will get him through the flames to confront Quirrell) as that would be highly unrealistic, given that Harry doesn't have a photographic memory. Maybe Hermione could do that, but not Harry.

Other Note: I'm not positive, but the epilogue seemed to indicate that Harry's first child, James Sirius, was a second year nineteen years after the final battle (when Harry was 36), which would mean that he was born seven years after the final battle, which would mean he was born when Harry was twenty-four, which would make him twenty-three in this story. Does that work?

Disclaimer: I still don't own Harry Potter.

"So where do you think you're going to be?" Ron asked.

"I think I have a pretty good idea," Harry responded.

"I'm going to be a Gryffindor," Ron announced proudly.

"How do you know that?" Harry asked. "I mean, unless you're a lazy, traitorous, idiot, you could end up in any of the other three houses."

"All my family has been in Gryffindor," Ron explained.

"So? Do Gryffindor parents necessarily have to raise Gryffindor children?" Harry asked, panicking slightly at the thought that Gryffindors being such horrible parents that their children would HAVE to be brave to survive it.

"All my family's been in Hufflepuff," Ernie Macmillan volunteered.

"And you already know that my family's all been in Slytherin," Draco reminded him.

"So all three of you want to be in one particular house simply because everyone else has been there?" Harry asked.

"Yep," Ron nodded.

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but that sounds a lot like Hufflepuff loyalty, wanting to be in the same House as everyone else in your family," Harry said casually. Ron and Draco looked distraught while Ernie beamed.

"Although," Harry continued thoughtfully. "Wanting to be in a House that everyone trusts implicitly and always underestimates is brilliant, possibly Ravenclaw of you. Or else a great way to help your Slytherin ambitions along."

Ernie growled at Harry, but was saved having to answer by his name being called. Fortunately, Malfoy didn't have much time to advance on Harry menacingly before his name was called.

"You didn't really mean all that, did you Harry?" Ron asked, his face white. "I really want to be in Gryffindor."

"I'm sure you'll get in there," Harry assured him, feeling a little bit guilty for messing with them. Not very, because Draco usually had anything Harry felt the need to do to him coming (well, except that whole attempted murder thing sixth year, but to be fair Draco tried to Crucio him first) and in a little over a year Ernie would most likely be convinced that he was evil. Ron, however, still had a huge inferiority complex that Harry wanted to help with, not make worse. He didn't have much more time to ponder this, however, as his name was up soon.

"Potter, Harry," Professor McGonagall read off.

Instantly, the whispers broke out.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

Now, Harry had had his fair share of notoriety in his first life and had had years to get used to the fame. Still, nothing quite compared to the first time a large group of people (particularly teenagers) had seen him.

"Yes, that's right," Harry said, stepping forward. The gossiping quickly died down and the teachers looked at each other in slight surprise. Clearly everyone had expected him to just passively encourage the rumors. As if. "I am Harry Potter. If anyone asks me if I'm sure that I am, thus implying that I don't have the capabilities of any self-respecting one-year-old, I will hex them. You have been warned."

Now, Harry wasn't sure that he'd actually hex them (at least if they were a third year or younger), but it seemed like a good way to stop all of the nonstop questioning of his identity. And the horrified look on Snape's face was a nice touch. Although now he probably just inadvertently confirmed that he was, in fact, James Potter reincarnate. Well, such is the life.

Harry then walked over to the hat and placed it on his head.

"Hmmm," the Hat said. "Difficult. Very Difficult."

How is it difficult? You've already sorted me once.

"Yes, but now you've gone back in time to manipulate events in your favor, which is a very Slytherin thing to do."

Good point. Except, you know, for the whole 'It was a complete and total accident' part.

"Well, you're incredibly intelligent for someone of your age, maybe you should be a Ravenclaw," the Hat suggested next.

Harry rolled his eyes. Actually, I'm rather average for someone of MY age, so no I shouldn't. Although I'll be damned if I let Hermione beat me as far as grades go. I don't care if she IS a genius; I'm still twelve years older than her.

The Hat sighed. "Fine, no Ravenclaw either. But since your loyalty, particularly to the Weasley family who you seem to support no matter what they do, is astounding, what about Hufflepuff?"

Harry shrugged. Go ahead; I'll just transfer to Gryffindor.

"Can you do that?" the Hat asked.

Another shrug. I'm the boy-who-lived pre-dark-wizard-rumors. I can decide who lives and who dies.

"Rather full of yourself, aren't you?" the Hat asked, annoyed at Harry's rejection of all other houses.

A little, yeah, Harry admitted. But hey, isn't that a Gryffindor trait? And why are you trying so hard to put me in a different House?

"Well, what am I supposed to do? Just put you in Gryffindor because you want me to and because I did it once already? That's not how these things work," the Hat explained.

That's how it worked last time, Harry disagreed.

"Well, as I have no memory of the incident, I'm forced to speculate. You, as a terrified eleven-year-old, had the nerve to argue with the being that decided the course of your life. Sounds like Gryffindor to me."

What do you mean 'course of your life'? I thought it only affected Hogwarts?

The Hat chuckled, actually chuckled. "Oh please, do you really believe that? Name one Slytherin nobody thought was either evil or a coward? Or, occasionally, an evil coward?"

Harry didn't have an answer for that.

"Or take Ravenclaws. They're supposed to be incredibly inept and spend their whole lives studying, even when you're hit in the face of examples of this not being true, such as, from what I can tell of your

experiences, Cho Chang and Luna Lovegood. Or Hufflepuff, they're supposed to be the House you go in when you don't have what it takes to be in any of the other houses, but Cedric Diggory was apparently the most qualified person in his year."

What do they say about Gryffindor? Harry asked, highly amused.

"Cannon Fodder."

Harry snorted. Typical. I guess I kinda see your point, though. I mean, Hagrid basically told me that all Dark Wizards are Slytherins, even though he knew at least one Golden-boy Gryffindor became one, even if he does think it's Sirius not Pettigrew. And you hear a lot about how so-and-so's family was all Slytherin so of course they're all Death Eaters or, at the very least, Pureblood fanatics. And the Weasley's put so much stock in the fact that they're all Gryffindor's that it's ridiculous.

"So you'll go in another House then?" the Hat asked hopefully.

Sorry, Harry apologized. I would, I really would, but I'd like to be with my friends again. Not to mention that Ron's too immature right now to consider being friends with a Slytherin.

"Fine," the Hat grumbled. "I suppose waltzing through the Veil of Death counts as being incredibly reckless anyway, might as well put you with the other people who don't seem to be capable of thinking things through in GRYFFINDOR!"

Predictably, his House gave him the loudest cheer yet, not suspecting that they'd just been insulted. Ron was quickly sorted afterwards.

"Well done, Ron, excellent," Percy said pompously.

"What do you mean excellent?" Harry asked, feigning confusion. "He got a Hogwarts Letter; of course they were going to sort him."

"I meant, good job getting into Gryffindor," Percy explained patronizingly.

"You mean that you would have been upset if he got into any of the other three equally noble Houses? I would've thought you'd just be happy that he's going to be a wizard at all."

"Well, I am, of course I am," Percy quickly backtracked. "It's just that it's better that he's in Gryffindor than in any of the other three."

"I thought Prefects were supposed to help promote inter-House unity," Harry scratched his head. "Maybe I should ask Dumbledore how he plans to achieve that when his representatives among the student body insist on perpetuating House prejudices."

Percy paled as the thought of what such a complaint would do to his chances to be Head Boy.

Harry turned his attention to his fellow first years just in time to hear Seamus ask, "How did he get covered in blood?"

"I've never asked," came the ghost's delicate reply. Unless Harry was very much mistaken, the 'he' they were referring to was the Bloody Baron. Now, he probably shouldn't divulge this, seeing as how it was obviously something they wanted to keep private, but then again, he'd never really liked the Bloody Baron or the Grey Lady.

"I can tell you," Harry spoke up.

Everyone turned to him. "And how would you, a first year, know a thing like that?" Sir Nicholas demanded.

Harry shrugged. "Magic?"

No one could find a flaw with that answer, although if Harry wasn't careful, he'd have everyone clamoring after him to retake Divination as he was obviously a Seer.

"So what happened?" asked Seamus.

"The Grey Lady, who, by the way, is the ghost of Ravenclaw Tower, is actually Helena Ravenclaw, the daughter of Rowena Ravenclaw. I'm guessing being the daughter of the most brilliant witch of the time

couldn't have been easy and she developed an inferiority complex. Her mother had a diadem that was said to make the wearer wiser. Helena decided it was a good idea to steal the diadem and run off to points unknown with it. Her mother sent a former suitor of hers, the Bloody Baron, to go and retrieve her. Helena wanted to go back was too proud and so refused. The Baron lost his temper, killed her, realized what he did, went all Emo, and then killed himself," Harry said, helping himself to some treacle tart.

"That sounds like a bad soap opera," Hermione said, sounding affronted. "Are you sure?"

"Hermione, didn't we already go over the whole 'asking Harry if he's sure' thing when it came to my name?"

"Well, yes, but you're more likely to know you're name than something that happened over a millennium ago?" Hermione asked reasonably.

"Yeah, how would you know?" Dean Thomas asked him.

Harry shrugged. "She told me?"

"Who, the Grey Lady?" Nearly Headless Nick looked bewildered. At Harry's nod, he continued, "When?!"

"Seventh year," Harry replied, making use of the amazing phenomena that was telling the truth but having that truth be so incredible that everyone assumed you were joking. Well, if you were lucky. If not, they tended to think you were a lying schizophrenic.

"Well, if you didn't want to tell us, you could have just said so," Seamus told him.

Eventually, the subject turned to families.

"I'm half and half," said Seamus. "Me Dad's a Muggle. Mam didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him."

The others laughed, but Harry frowned. It had seemed so amusing the first time around, but with what he'd heard of Snape's upbringing because Eileen Prince had done exactly the same thing...

"You're lucky," Harry found himself saying. Everyone looked over at him, confused. "You're lucky your dad took it so well. He could have easily panicked and left. Or stayed and resented your mother for lying to him and you for trapping him there. You're lucky that your father's a good man."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, as no one quite knew what to say to that.

Finally, Ron asked, "What about you, Neville?"

"Well, my Gran brought me up and she's a witch," said Neville, "but the family thought I was a Muggle for ages."

"Don't you mean a Squib?" Harry asked.

Neville nodded. "My Great-Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me - he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned - but nothing happened until I was eight. Great-uncle Algie came round for tea and was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my great-auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced – all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased. Gran was crying, she was so happy."

Dear God, what a difference a mere dozen years makes in a person's perspective! "So, let me get this straight," Harry said, trying to stay calm. "You're basically saying that your family kept attempting to kill you in order to try and force you to do some magic? So, if you hadn't been a wizard they would have rather that you died? And your Grandmother was so happy that you were magic she completely overlooked the fact that if you hadn't managed to use magic, you would have died?"

"W-well they wanted to know if I was going to be able to attend Hogwarts," Neville said timidly.

Harry knew that this probably wasn't something that Neville needed to hear, but it WAS something that he needed to say. He remembered all too well the damage Neville's 'loving family' had done to him, damage it took him years to get over. Harry also remembered Neville destroying the last bit of Voldemort's immortality and enabling Harry to win and felt an intense wave of anger at the thought of what Neville's childhood must have been like. Because honestly, the Dursely's may have hated him with a passion and made that abundantly clear, but at least they never tried to kill him.

"If they wanted to know so badly, they should have checked the Hogwarts register. Granted that was probably highly unusual and possibly against regulation, but Dumbledore would have made an exception if he knew that your relatives would attempt to kill you," Harry said coldly. "And all that pressure was probably detrimental to any chance of you performing accidental magic. Basically, what I'm saying is that they really shouldn't have done that to you, Neville."

Neville said nothing, but eyed him with an oddly speculative look on his face.

--

Harry's classes progressed much as they did the last time, he supposed, except he knew how to perform all the simple first-year spells and thus his teachers were torn between thinking he was a prodigy and thinking he was somehow cheating.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was a little different, though. Harry decided that while he wouldn't do anything that would make it blatantly obvious that he knew that Quirrell and Voldemort on the back of his head, that didn't mean he had to ignore what he had noticed the first time around, even if he had misinterpreted it.

The minute Quirrell's back was turned to write on the chalkboard, Harry felt the familiar pain in his scar (or semi-familiar; he hadn't felt it in six years, after all) and he put his hand on his forehead and yelped.

"E-e-everything all r-right, Mr. P-P-P-Potter?" Quirrell asked.

"Your turban makes my scar hurt," Harry said bluntly.

"W-what?" Quirrell asked, looked panicked.

The rest of the class just laughed, clearly not believing him. But, he supposed that was better than them deciding he was crazy. In fact, maybe if he set it up like this now, there wouldn't be that Rita Skeeter fiasco when she found out about his dreams.

"You heard me," Harry told him. "So I would appreciate it if you could not have your turban completely facing me as I think that would be more conducive to my learning environment."

"How does your SCAR hurt, Harry?" Hermione asked skeptically.
"Wouldn't that be your forehead?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you, Hermione. All I know is that my scar hurts, not my forehead."

"HOW?" Hermione repeated.

Harry wasn't quite sure how to explain it and so left it at that.

--

Finally came the day he was most looking forward to: First-year Potions as a semi-competent adult. Some would consider this cheating. Harry would consider having the Potions teacher not have a personal vendetta against you as cheating. It evened out.

"Ah, yes," were Snape's first words to him. "Harry Potter. Our new – celebrity."

"I'm sorry, sir, is that you're way of asking for an autograph?" Harry asked innocently. He took the vein bulging in Snape's forehead to be a 'no' and continued, "It's just that I only found out that my parents weren't drunken bums who died in a car crash a little over a month ago, so I'm very new to this fame thing. I appreciate how considerate you're being."

Oh, now look, another vein! While Harry fully acknowledged that Snape was one of the metaphorical ‘good guys’, he also realized that the only possible chance of him getting Snape to like him died when the Sorting Hat proclaimed him a Gryffindor.

Actually, he reflected, he very well could make an effort...Nah. What was the fun if he didn’t have anyone to bother? And at least with Snape, everyone took his side.

“Potter!” Snape’s voice jolted him out of his musings. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood.”

“Draught of Living Death,” Harry replied matter-of-factly.

“Which is?” Snape pressed.

“Professor, I’m not entirely sure why you’re asking me questions to which you don’t know the answer but I’m pleased to inform you that I, a first year, know that it is a very powerful sleeping potion that makes it appear that you’re dead.”

“Of course I knew that, Potter!” Snape snapped.

“I’m sure you did,” Harry said, sounding slightly dubious.

“Well, I suppose everyone gets lucky once, something that you’d know plenty about, Potter...” Snape muttered distractedly.

Harry stared. “Um, sir? Did you just compare me getting a potions answer to correct to Voldemort attempting to brutally murder me after brutally murdering my Mum and Dad?”

Snape started, realizing he’d spoken aloud. “Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

“In the potions cupboard?” Harry suggested.

Snape’s eyes flashed. “Potter!”

"What? You can't actually expect me to go out, find a goat, and extract a bezoar from its stomach...can you?" At this, Harry looked a bit scared; he had no doubt that Snape could very well expect that of Harry. Especially if he continued to provoke him like this.

"What's the difference between monkshood and Wolfsbane?" Snape fired off another question.

"It's not very nice to try and trick me, sir," Harry said. "And I know full well that they're the same plant. Although why they go by two different names, well, three if you count aconite, is beyond me."

"I suppose you qualify as competent, Potter," Snape said grudgingly, completely ignoring the fact that first years should not be expected to memorize their textbooks on the first day.

Although that first question...when Harry was trying to get Ginny to forgive him for abandoning her after Dumbledore's funeral, he decided to send her a message in flowers and so got a book on Victorian Flower Language. If he recalled correctly, asphodel was a type of lily meaning 'My regrets follow you to the grave' and wormwood means 'absence' and also typically symbolized bitter sorrow. If you combined that, it meant 'I bitterly regret Lily's death.' Now, there's no way a normal first year would be able to get that (and Harry didn't even know if Snape meant to convey that), but it just seemed like too big of a coincidence, out of all the potions Snape could have asked about, he chose that.

"Thank you," Harry said quietly.

Snape just nodded curtly. "Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

Harry partnered with Ron and noticed that Neville was looking a bit pale.

"Hey, Neville? Why don't you work with Hermione? After all, she's read the textbook a few times and so she probably won't mess up," Harry suggested.

Hermione smiled at this and the two moved over to the same table.

And Harry was right; Hermione did know what she was doing and Neville managed to avoid exploding anything this time around. He still cast Protego on himself, but that was more to get into the habit of it. Now that he knew how to protect himself from the various potions incidents, why not use it, after all?

Review please!

Note: I, personally, am a fan of Snape. Harry, however, is not. I'm trying to have him be a good guy without Harry necessarily having to like him, even if he appreciates everything he's done for him. Does that make sense?

Chapter Four

Note: Harry may be being a bit too unconcerned with what people might think of his twenty-three-year-old self pretending to be eleven, but it's not like anyone is likely to conclude that he's from the future, they'll just think that he's precocious. And no, I don't think Harry will really bother to tell anybody that he's from the future because, honestly, why would he need to? And if he did, Hermione and Dumbledore would be riding him to act more responsibly since he's not actually a child anymore and not to abuse his future knowledge, and where's the fun in that?

Disclaimer: I still don't own Harry Potter.

The morning of their first flying lesson had Harry a bit nervous. Not that he didn't know how to fly, of course, far from it. But the last time had been rather...eventful. He wanted to get on the Quidditch Team, but he wasn't about to just sit back and let Neville break his wrist. Granted, it didn't do any lasting physical damage, but it had deeply embarrassed him and Harry didn't feel that he would be justified to let it all happen again just so that he wouldn't have to wait a year to join the team.

And then there was the issue of Draco Malfoy to consider. Last time, he had stolen Neville's Remembrall and the ensuing dominance battle between the two of them had earned him a place on the team. Harry had no doubt that Malfoy would pull the same stunt; the only difference was that he had to somehow repeat the catch without the accompanying hatred. It was possible that the event wouldn't take place at all, that Neville wouldn't fall off his broom. On the other hand, how was Harry supposed to prevent that? The best he could really do was a cushioning charm, which he vaguely wondered why Madam Hooch hadn't done the first time. Because, really, it's not like she could have realistically been panicked because Neville, no matter how incompetent he had seemed back then, couldn't have been the only one to have ever fallen off a broom.

Perhaps she was a Squib; he didn't think he'd ever seen her do magic. He supposed it didn't matter though, since he (unlike practically everyone else in the Wizarding World) honestly didn't care

if someone was part house-elf. And no, the reason he used house elves as an example wasn't prejudice, just simple logic as to the circumstances that would lead to a house elf and a human having a baby.

He was jolted from his musing by Draco's arrival. Neville had just received his Remembrall and Draco had, as before, snatched it. Harry had never found Remembralls very useful, despite what other people said. After all, what was the point of knowing you'd forgotten something if the bloody ball never told you what it was? And for that matter, who hasn't forgotten something at any given point in time? Maybe it was like Muggle mood rings. Of course, those might have even been more pointless because chances are you already knew what you were feeling and thus didn't need a gaudy piece of jewelry to tell you.

Ron jumped to his feet, clearly eager to start a fight.

"Oh, sit down Ron. It's too early to fight," Harry complained. "I mean, we haven't even finished breakfast."

"But...but Malfoy!" Ron protested.

"Oh, he'll still be around later if you absolutely must engage in petty House-pride bickering," Harry assured him.

Ron looked a little cross at the dismissive mention of his apparent family feud with the Malfoys, but did as Harry asked. Harry briefly wondered why in the world the Wizarding World still operated on a blood feud system since most Muggle societies (and certainly all Western European ones) had outgrown generation-long grudges that nobody ever knew the meaning for and that never ended until a person from both families fell in love with each other or they killed each other centuries ago.

"Thank you," Harry said. "So what are you doing over here anyway?" he asked Draco. "Was Neville's Remembrall too shiny for you to resist?"

"Well, I initially came over here to taunt Weasel-Boy about his broom quality," Draco informed him.

Harry snorted at the double-entendre, which flew way over everyone's heads except Hermione's, who looked a little disapprovingly at Harry and muttered, "Boys."

Draco just looked at Harry strangely and continued. "But then I saw this. Everyone knows that only losers need Remembralls. They went out of fashion at least twenty years ago." Clearly Draco didn't understand the appeal of retronest. But for that matter, Augusta Longbottom probably didn't know either, she was just old and thought toads were still in.

"Then why did you decide that you absolutely must have it immediately and couldn't have even asked Neville first?" Harry asked reasonably.

"I..." Draco trailed off, not sure how to answer that.

"Draco, are you a kleptomaniac?" Harry asked him seriously.

"What the bloody hell is that?" Malfoy asked, sensing he'd been insulted.

"A person who is compelled to steal for no adequately explained reason," Harry replied, remembering something Hermione had told him a few years back. Or it was something like that. It definitely meant stealing a lot. In fact, Harry could probably make a good case for Voldemort being a kleptomaniac. And Dumbledore, too, the items he kept from Harry because he wasn't 'mature enough' for things his father had had since he was a child until after Voldemort was defeated.

"No!" Draco insisted.

"Then I'm sure you won't have any trouble returning that," Harry smiled brightly at him.

Malfoy huffed in annoyance. "Fine," he said, handing the ball back and then returned to his table.

Harry looked up and saw Professor McGonagall, watching from the staff table, gazing at the scene with approval. Oh dear Lord, if Harry wasn't careful, they might actually make him a bloody Prefect. And while it's true that Harry was upset at the time, he quickly realized that Ron being the Prefect instead was rather nice as he didn't have to be up at all hours patrolling the corridors in case any students fancied a midnight stroll. Seriously, you'd think that Hogwarts'd have a better security system, but nooooooooooooo. That's not 'traditional.' Tradition in the Wizarding World, as Harry understood it, was just what they said when their hopelessly outdated ways were questioned and served as an excuse to continue doing what they've been doing since time immemorial simply because they've been doing it since time immemorial.

"Why do you put up with him?" Hermione asked Harry once he returned his attention to the table.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. "He hasn't actually done anything yet." And we've been here for over a week and a half, he added silently.

"Well, no," Hermione conceded. "But he doesn't seem like a very pleasant person."

Harry shrugged. "Unpleasant people need friends, too," he pointed out.

"So you're taking pity on him?"

"No, no," Harry shook his head. "I might be nice to someone because I pity them, but I would never befriend someone because of that." In fact, it wasn't even guaranteed that he'd make an effort to be civil, if Snape was any indication. Harry pitied the man immensely and he couldn't imagine if Ginny chose to marry, say, Draco Malfoy (in true Romeo & Juliet fashion) and then he told Dumbledore something he'd overheard as a way to destroy Voldemort and that ended up getting Ginny killed. And then if she had a child who (due to the recessive

nature of red hair and the dominant nature of dark eyes) looked just like Malfoy with Ginny's eyes and having to teach him for six years even though they both hated each other and he'd had to live with the guilt of Ginny's death for ten whole years prior to meeting the child. (And Harry had heard that Draco was planning on naming his first-born son Scorpius, of all things. Honestly, did that man have any sense?)

Still, it's not like Snape would actually appreciate any effort on his part and probably think he was patronizing him; so really, why not just enjoy the animosity while it lasted? Although note to self: Should Snape, against all odds, be ordered by Dumbledore to assist in his suicide, tell Order that a Death Eater did it and then refuse to talk about it claiming 'trauma.'

"So then why?" Hermione pressed.

"I just think that life would be a lot simpler if I kept my list of enemies down to a bare minimum. Malfoy could probably do quite a bit to taint my Hogwarts experience if he so chose, and I know that he endorses Death Eater views, but he's eleven; he doesn't really understand it. Besides, I've always wanted a friendly rivalry with someone and he seems like he could be a fun rival," Harry explained.

"So you don't really like him?"

"Not really, but then, we've been here for a week and a half; I don't really know him." And it was true. Even after knowing him for twelve years, he still didn't.

"Fair enough. Now, what do you mean he supports Death Eaters? As in Voldemort?" Hermione asked. Harry was a little surprised that Hermione used Riddle's chosen pseudonym, not the Ministry-approved euphemisms, but then again, she'd only been really introduced to the Wizarding World two weeks ago, so perhaps she hadn't gotten into the habit yet. Or ever, if Harry could help it.

"Draco's father is a Death Eater," Harry told her quietly. "And his mother supports his Pureblood ideologies in principle, but doesn't want Draco caught up in all of that."

"Then why didn't they arrest Mr. Malfoy, if he was a Death Eater?" Harry asked.

"Did I mention that Saint Mungo's just happened to finally receive enough funding to build a children's wing right before Lucius was to have been tried?" Harry asked innocently.

"Bribery?!" Hermione asked scandalously.

"Get used to it," Harry advised her.

"And what exactly is Pureblood ideology? I mean, I've read up on the War, of course, and it's mentioned quite a bit in there, but it doesn't really go into much detail on WHAT it is, they just assume that you already know," she told him.

Harry sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. How best to explain? "You'll find that Blood Purity, like many things in the Wizarding World, makes no sense whatsoever. Wizards, of course, don't seem to notice this and continue to act like it's the gospel truth. It's basically the school of thought that only those who are pureblooded have a right to be wizards and everyone else is inherently inferior. They won't actually give any reason as to why they think that, save occasionally someone mentioning that Muggle-borns live the first eleven years of their life in a completely different culture. Note that that is exactly like saying that someone who was raised in a different country is inherently inferior because they don't understand British ways."

"What is a Pureblood exactly? I mean, I get the whole 'descended from wizards' thing, but how far back does it have to go?" Hermione asked.

Harry grinned. "Technically, it means that you have four wizarding grandparents. My grandparents on my mother's side were Muggles, so I'm known as a half-blood. Any children I have, though, will theoretically be Purebloods, despite their Muggle-born grandmother. Of course, I'm sure that Blood Purists won't actually admit that she could possibly be a Pureblood. For most people, I think it's 'if you

know how closely related to a Muggle you are, you're too closely related to be a Pureblood."

"How do they manage to keep from marrying Muggles or half-bloods?" Hermione asked. "I mean, there can't be very many proper Pureblood families, can there?"

"Nope," Harry smirked. "In fact, they seem to die off all the time."

"Then how...?" Hermione trailed off, thinking.

"Guess."

"Oh, don't tell me they..." Hermione trailed off again, looking slightly green. "You know what, I think I have my own philosophy regarding marriage: 'If you know how closely related you are to someone, you're too closely related to date.'"

"Works for me," Harry agreed, making a mental note to never look up his or Ginny's family tree under any circumstance.

--

Harry looked over in time to see Neville's broom take off. He was rising pretty quickly and Harry tensed, waiting for him to fall. When he did, Harry quickly and silently cast a cushioning charm. There was a loud thump as Neville hit the ground, but overall he seemed to be okay. Of course, try telling that to Madame Hooch, who insisted on taking him to the Hospital Wing anyway.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the Hospital Wing! You leave these brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come along, dear," she said and guided him back into the building.

"Oh please," Harry said, wondering how he could have possibly believed that last time. "The worst we'll get is a detention."

Malfoy burst into laughter when he was sure that Madame Hooch was out of earshot. "Did you see his face, the great lump?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," Parvati snapped.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" asked Pansy. "Never thought you'd like fat little cry babies, Parvati."

"To be fair, it's not like he was crying," Harry pointed out. "I don't think he was even hurt."

"How could he not be hurt? He fell thirty feet," Lavender reminded him.

"True," Harry nodded. "But it's not like he hasn't fallen from great heights before without getting injured."

"Look!" Malfoy exclaimed, spotting Neville's Remembrall and rushing forward to pick it up. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

"I swear," Harry said, somewhat annoyed. "What is it with you and that thing? I'm sure if you really want one that badly, your father can buy you one."

Malfoy flushed. "I do not want one!"

"Coulda fooled me..." Harry muttered. "Because it seems like you keep stealing Neville's because you're jealous that you don't have an awesome magical mood ring."

Draco looked confused at the end of Harry's statement, but quickly rallied. "Nonsense, I just think that it's an affront to proper wizards when someone from such an old family has to rely on those."

"Um, pardon me," Hermione spoke up. "But what do you mean by 'old family.' Aren't all families equally old?"

"Well, yes," Draco admitted reluctantly. "But I meant old Pureblood wizard family."

"Just checking."

"So you hope to cure Neville of his reliance on this (which, given he got it this morning, isn't exactly an issue) by doing what, exactly?" Harry asked.

"Destroying it," Draco replied promptly.

"The sad thing is, you probably are trying to help him in a rather twisted way," Harry remarked. "I probably can't force you not to destroy it, but we could bet on who gets it."

"What kind of bet?" Malfoy asked, intrigued.

"Seeker competition," Harry explained. "We could give the Remembrall to someone and then have them throw it and whichever one of us catches it wins and gets to do what they like with it."

"And if no one catches it?" Malfoy asked.

Harry shrugged. "Then it'll shatter, won't it?"

"You're on," Draco agreed. "Who'll be the judge, though? We'd need to find someone impartial."

"I'm thinking...Theodore Nott," Harry said. "You wouldn't trust anyone in Gryffindor and I know that Nott doesn't take orders from you, so I guess that's about as close to impartial as we're going to get."

"I agree, Nott's a good choice. What do you say?" Draco turned to Theodore Nott.

Looking a little peeved at being dragged into this, Nott nonetheless nodded curtly and grabbed the Remembrall. Once the three of them were up in the air, Nott said, "Ready, set, go" and dropped the Remembrall.

Harry and Draco, both on rather pathetic brooms, raced neck and neck to be the first to catch it. Draco didn't really want to catch the Remembrall, per se, as much as prevent Harry from catching it and his pride wouldn't let him do anything less than his best. Finally, half a

foot from the ground, Harry's hand closed over it just seconds before Draco's and they both tumbled onto the grass.

"Nice flying," Harry complimented, knowing that losing in front of all of their classmates was likely to put Malfoy in a bad mood and make him say or do something stupid.

"Thanks," Malfoy said grudgingly. "You too."

"HARRY POTTER AND DRACO MALFOY!" Professor McGonagall screeched.

Malfoy looked a little green as the Transfiguration Professor continued to yell at them.

"Don't worry; worst come to worst, we'll just get a detention and lose a few house points," Harry assured him. "Hell, we might even get some recognition for our amazing flying."

Draco perked up a bit at this.

"-how dare you-might have broken your neck-"

"Well, unless it killed me instantly, I'm sure that Madame Pomfrey could fix it right up," Harry said cheerfully. "Although it's nice to know that you care."

"Potter, Malfoy, follow me, now," McGonagall instructed.

First, McGonagall led them to the dungeons, where Snape was teaching 6th year potions. Against all odds, the Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint (who ended up having to repeat his seventh year, unless Harry was very much mistaken) seemed to have qualified for NEWT potions.

"Severus, a word."

Snape and McGonagall went into his office to have a private discussion.

"My father is going to kill me," Draco announced.

"If you were going to get in trouble, she wouldn't need to get Snape involved," Harry pointed out.

"Then what could she possibly be talking to him about?" Draco asked.

"I don't know; how's the Slytherin Seeker?"

"Well, I heard the old one graduated last year so they haven't found a new one yet and...You don't think..." Draco trailed off, sounding incredibly hopeful.

Harry shrugged. "You never know. In fact, I'm nearly positive McGonagall's going to ask me. I heard that the Gryffindor team hasn't had a decent Seeker since Ron's brother Charlie graduated."

"But first years aren't allowed to have their own brooms."

"And you brought yours anyway," Harry pointed out.

"Still, that rule probably precludes us from playing," Draco said, sounding disappointed.

"In most circumstances, yes, but I'm Harry freaking Potter, of course they're going to make an exception."

"What about me?" Draco asked.

"They'll have to let you play, too, so it looks like I'm not getting special treatment," Harry said.

Shortly after, Snape and McGonagall left the office and Flint was called out into the hall.

"Flint, Malfoy will be playing as Seeker," Snape informed him without ceremony.

Harry gave Draco a look that said see? Draco just nodded, thrilled.

And he didn't even have to bribe his way on this time.

With that, he and McGonagall left to go find Wood.

Review Please!

Chapter Five

Note: I don't know about the rest of the world, but where I live, marrying someone that you know that you're related to (no matter how distantly) is generally frowned upon so the Wizards' habit of doing just that has always been a bit of a squick factor with me and I tend to hold Hermione's views on the subject.

Other Note: Sorry this took so long, the document this story was in got corrupted someone and so my computer ate it.

Other Other Note: What were they thinking changing 'Philosopher's Stone' to 'Sorcerer's Stone'? I mean, I get it's an alliteration, but HONESTLY.

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

That night passed quite peacefully as Draco wasn't actively trying to get Harry expelled and Harry didn't see any particular reason to go and wander about discovering what he already knew about the Philosopher's Stone. Of course, that might make it harder to explain to Ron and Hermione why he felt the need to go to the corridor on the third floor that Dumbledore had mentioned involved dying a horrible, painful death. Then again, he wasn't even sure if he should involve them. Last time, he hadn't had any choice because he wasn't capable of getting through there alone and his friends knew all about Voldemort and the stone anyway. This time, he was technically a legal adult and dragging two eleven-year-old children along with him to face Voldemort seemed highly irresponsible. Come to think of it, considering that Quirrell had no chance in hell of getting the stone from the mirror, did he even need to bother going down there? But if he didn't, would Quirrell return to teach the next year? While any teacher, even a possessed one, would be better than that pompous git Lockhart, having Voldemort at Hogwarts while his Horcrux was running around attacking people would probably be a very bad idea. Hm. He'd need to give this more thought.

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of the daily post. More specifically, by the two broom-shaped packages that required six owls each to lift. One broom went to Harry at the Gryffindor table, the

other to Draco at the Slytherin. Harry raised his broom at Malfoy in a ‘cheers’ gesture, which the other boy returned.

Harry quickly scanned the card. “It’s a good thing that Professor McGonagall warned me not to open this broomstick-shaped package at the table. After all, something that is shaped exactly in the form of a broom can be so many, many things,” Harry muttered sarcastically. “What, does she think I’m stupid or something? Or, more accurately, everyone else?”

Ron glanced over at the card to see what he was talking about. “A Nimbus Two Thousand!” Ron moaned. “I’ve never even touched one.”

Well, at least now I know what to get him for Christmas, Harry thought wryly. He wondered briefly why he hadn’t thought to do so the first time around. Sure, first years couldn’t have their own brooms at Hogwarts, but nobody actually listened to that anyway. And if Ron complained, as he was wont to do, about accepting charity, Harry could simply point to the Weasley sweater he hoped to receive. After all, Molly had sent it to him because Ron told her that he wasn’t expecting any presents and if that wasn’t charity, what was? Not that he minded; he’d have done anything for some charity in his early years, particularly when he was still at the Dursely’s.

After breakfast, Harry headed back to the Common Room alone as Ron had chosen to stay behind and confront Malfoy about the blatant favoritism (which really meant that Ron wished that the school would buy him his own broom) and was cornered by Hermione. “I suppose you think that this is a reward for breaking the rules?”

“No, I think that this is a reward for me being ridiculously good at Quidditch.” Harry paused. “And because my parents were brutally murdered.”

“You talk about that a lot,” Hermione noted.

Harry grinned. “Yeah, so does everyone else. I’m just trying to keep up.”

“I still can’t believe that you were rewarded for risking your life!”

Harry nodded, his expression serious. “I know. I mean, they were never going to expel me for something like that, but at the very least I should have lost some points and gotten a detention. I realize that what I did was reckless, but you have to understand that Draco, despite his inability to hold his broom the right way, knows what he’s doing. I’m apparently a prodigy, although I had no way of knowing that at the time but if I got hurt, it would have been my own fault and I would have taken responsibility for it. I guess what I don’t really get is why it matters so much to you.”

“Why? Because you could have gotten seriously injured; what more reason do I need?” Hermione asked him.

Harry laughed. “Hermione, this is a magical school, and not a particularly safe one. People get grievously injured on an hourly basis. Horrible injuries are just something you’re going to have to get used to and I think you know this. So what’s the real reason?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think this has more to do with the fact that we broke the rules and you seem to hold them as sacred,” Harry theorized.

Hermione reddened. “I do not! It’s just that rules are put into place for our protection and as such we should follow them and not flaunt our disregard for them!”

“That is true,” Harry acknowledged. “Sometimes, maybe even most times. But I won’t follow pointless rules. If I feel that something has been put in place for my own protection, then yes, chances are I’ll follow it. No promises, though. And I won’t purposely endanger any fellow students. Occasionally, I may do something stupid like this. I probably shouldn’t, but then again, I’m eleven.” Technically. “You’ve got to cut me some slack.”

“I suppose I can...if you really mean it about being more careful,” Hermione agreed.

“So we’re friends again?”

“F-friends?” Hermione repeated, looking dazed.

“Great,” Harry smiled, pretending not to realize why his use of the word friends had gotten to her so much (as her magic and her intellect had always made her a bit of an outcast and he could certainly sympathize) and proceeded to his dormitory.

And was it strange that seeing his broomstick again had been just like seeing a long-dead friend again?”

--

The morning of Halloween, Harry received an unexpected letter. Well, the letter was unexpected because he never got mail, but the handwriting was downright shocking.

Sirius.

Quickly, Harry tore open the letter, wondering how in the world Sirius had managed to send him an owl from Azkaban. Unless...but no. He hadn't done anything drastic, like getting sorted into Slytherin, for Sirius to break out for, so how could the timeline have possibly been moved up?

“Dear Harry,

I realize that you’ve probably never heard of me. Or, at least I hope you’ve never heard of me. If you have, it’s all been pretty vile, I imagine and you’ll soon hear it at any rate. Most of it is a pack of vicious, vicious lies. Note my use of the word ‘most’ because I you’ll have to remember that I was a teenager at one time. When you reach puberty, you’ll understand.

Anyway, I thought you’d like to know that I’m not actually a mass murderer, I am not nor have ever been a supporter of Voldemort, and I’m your Godfather. Surprise!

Here's to hoping that since I broke out during the year, they won't subject you to the horrors of Dementors,

Sirius Black

Ex-Con Extraordinaire."

Harry snorted. Typical.

"BLOODY HELL!"

Apparently, Sirius's escape had made the Daily Prophet again. Harry leaned over to Percy. "Hey, when you're done with that, do you think I could borrow it?"

"Certainly, Harry," Percy replied and, twenty minutes later, handed him the paper.

"Thanks," he said absently. Sirius's story was on the front page AND it was by Rita Skeeter. This oughta be good.

Black Escapes Azkaban

By Rita Skeeter

Sirius Black is widely known to be the most infamous prisoner ever held in Azkaban. The question of why, however, has yet to be answered. Yes, Black killed thirteen people with one curse. On the other hand, twelve of them were Muggles, which even the most inept wizards can accomplish, and the thirteenth was one such inept wizard.

Black's allegiance to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named came as a great shock to many and it is easy to see why. Black was certainly not a member of one of the most prominent Dark Families in Britain, after all, nor was he implicated in an attempted murder when he was sixteen.

Despite the questionable nature of Black's reputation as infamous (given that Azkaban also houses noted prisoners as Black's cousin,

Bellatrix Lestrange who was convicted for, among other things, torturing Aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom into insanity and who took down eighteen of the two dozen Aurors sent to capture her), three facts remain. People are terrified of Black. No one has ever broken out of Azkaban. Black broke out of Azkaban.

Despite its reputation as being impenetrable, perhaps there ought to have been a contingency plan in place. When questioned, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge had no comment but did insist that, "We are doing all we can to recapture Black and we beg the magical community to remain calm." When pressed, Fudge admitted that they had not yet worked out a plan, although since Black escaped mere hours ago, a plan will likely soon emerge.

In the weeks before Black's escape, he was known to mutter in his sleep about "that greasy git" and "gotta go back to Majorca." Who exactly is this "greasy git" and is Black actually heading to Spain? Only time will tell.

Harry snorted. Rita Skeeter was really quite amusing when she wasn't hell-bent on destroying his life. Still, he wished she hadn't thrown in that part about Neville's parents. He'd have to talk to Draco and see if he could convince him to get the other first-years to lay off of Neville. The older years were generally too busy harassing each other to worry about them so Neville wouldn't have to deal with much. Although really, what kind of eleven-year-old taunted someone for having their parents tortured into insanity (especially when the taunters were actually related to the perpetrators)?

--

Harry arrived to Charms quite pleased. Draco, still shocked and thrilled that he (along with Harry) was the youngest seeker in over a century, still felt immensely grateful to him and agreed not to mention Neville's parents and to stop the others from doing so. In fact, he'd even gone so far as to tell Harry not to do something stupid like going after Black when he was a fully trained wizard and psychotic killer while Harry was a first-year, which was a far cry from the "I'd want revenge if it were me" of the first time around.

The students were all whispering about Sirius when Harry arrived and some shot him curious looks, clearly aware of how Sirius and Harry's father were best friends. Harry briefly wondered why no one had said anything about Sirius supposedly betraying his family to Voldemort, but then he realized that that wasn't exactly common knowledge and, what's more, not technically a crime. Granted it was morally reprehensible, but you really couldn't prove if someone was under a Fidelius Charm nor who the Secret Keeper was. Additionally, Harry could safely assume that most Secret Keepers were more trustworthy than Wormtail and so the only way they would betray someone would be through torture, and cracking under torture isn't exactly something one should be punished for.

Once class started, Harry didn't bother practicing Wingardium Leviosa as he already knew it and instead divided his focus between helping Seamus with it and watching Ron and Hermione. When Hermione levitated her feather perfectly and got points and Ron started looking angry, Harry quickly levitated his feather over to Ron and began tickling him.

Needless to say, Ron was very irritated with Harry by the end of class.
"Why in the world did you feel the need to torture me with that thing?"

"Because I was bored and it amused me," Harry told him.

"And you got it so quickly! Like Hermione, but at least you didn't go rubbing everyone's face in it. It's not wonder no one can stand her. She's a nightmare, honestly."

Harry groaned. Good God, Ron was obnoxious at that age. "You're just sore that she corrected your pronunciation. But you know, if she didn't, you never would have gotten it by the end of class."

"I guess..." Ron admitted grudgingly.

"And I'd like to invoke the same rules I have concerning Draco where Hermione is concerned. Namely: No badmouthing my friends in front of me. After all, I don't let Draco say anything unless you're there to defend yourself. Alright?" Harry asked seriously.

"Fine..." Ron sighed.

Harry turned to look at Hermione and saw there were tears brimming in her eyes. 'Thank you,' she mouthed.

Harry just smiled.

--

At the Halloween feast, Harry made sure to eat as quickly as he could in anticipation for the troll attack. He knew they'd continue the feast upstairs afterwards, but it somehow wasn't the same.

Sure enough, twenty minutes into the feast, Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall and gasped out, "Troll – in the dungeons – thought you ought to know."

Hm, what was his reason for being absent in the first place? Everyone else was there. And for that matter, how could he have explained why he was in the dungeons? And did he just leave the doors open and hope a troll would come wandering in? He'd never seen any in the Forbidden Forest. There was really no conceivable way this could have been an accident. Great going Quirrell.

"Prefects," Dumbledore roared. "Lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

If Harry didn't know for a fact that the troll wouldn't really be there, he'd have pointed out that the Slytherin dormitories were in the dungeons. Although how to explain how he knew...

"So," Harry said brightly. "I'm feeling reckless and thus I'm going to go looking for the troll. Who's with me?"

Everyone at the Gryffindor table looked at him like he was crazy.

"We're in," one of the Weasley's said.

Percy looked aghast. "Fred!"

"I suppose I'll have to go to make sure you don't get yourself killed," Hermione sighed. "Although for the record, this totally counts as endangering others."

"If she's going, I'm going," Ron said, eager to prove that he was just as good a friend as Hermione.

Neville, who was also feeling reckless due to the article mentioning his parents, nodded that he was going.

Percy looked longingly at the staff table; the teachers had already left to go to the Dungeons. He turned to one of the other Gryffindor prefects and instructed them to get the Gryffindors back safely while he chased after his brothers and their friends.

Harry, meanwhile, quickly left the Great Hall, the others hurrying behind him. He soon reached the girls bathroom (taking care not to pass by Snape heading to stop Quirrell from getting past Fluffy) and stood outside of it. "Excellent, my troll senses seem to be working," he beamed once he heard the troll inside.

The Weasley's, Neville, and Hermione did not look nearly as excited.

"Are you SURE this is a good idea, Harry?" Ron asked, looking a bit green.

"Of course," Harry nodded. "I mean, we're just a couple of schoolchildren about to face off against a fully-grown mountain troll. What could possibly go wrong?" And with that, Harry headed into the bathroom before the others had a chance to reply. "I suggest we use 'Sectumsempra,'" Harry said as the others followed him in. "Except Ron and Neville, you guys do Wingardium Leviosa and drop his club on his head."

"Do you think I can do that?" Ron asked.

"Positive," Harry grinned and fired the cutting curse at the troll. The troll's thick hide meant that it did not do nearly the amount of damage it would have done had the target been a human, but it still split its arm open. Behind him, the twins, Percy, and Hermione also cast

Sectumsempra and did quite a job distracting the troll. Good thing, too, as it was taking Ron and Neville awhile to levitate the club and once he did, even longer to move it over the troll and drop it.

"Wow..." George said. "Keep this up-"

"And we might actually-"

"Admit we're related."

Even Percy looked impressed. "Well done, Ron."

Ron's ears turned pink and he looked very pleased.

"Nice, Neville," Harry complimented.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made them all look up. A moment later, Professor McGonagall, along with Snape and Quirrell, burst into the room. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper and sat down, clutching his heart. Harry rolled his eyes at the DADA professor's theatrics.

Snape bent down to examine the troll while Professor McGonagall glared at them, looking angrier than she had when she caught Harry and Draco playing Seeker.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" demanded McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. "You're lucky you weren't killed."

"After you guys left, I decided I wanted to go looking for the troll. I was...upset, after hearing that Sirius had broken out of prison." Mostly just because he didn't understand why it happened so early, but then, no one said he had to be specific. "Neville was feeling the same way because of what the article had said about Bellatrix but he wouldn't have done anything if I hadn't have gone and he didn't want me to go alone and the others went with me so as to stop me from getting killed. Percy did try to dissuade me, but once I left he had little choice but to follow me and had another prefect take the rest of the Gryffindor's back." Harry was laying it on a little thick, but he didn't want to get the others in any trouble.

"Well – in that case..." Professor McGonagall said, staring at the three of them. "Potter, you foolish boy, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Harry shrugged. "I wasn't really thinking of that so much as how one of my father's closest friends could have been a Voldemort supporter and mass murderer."

McGonagall looked away, no doubt thinking about the fact that said friend (although it was Peter, not Sirius) had also been Harry's family's Secret Keeper.

"Potter, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this. I understand your frustration, but you should not take pointless risks like this! As for the rest of you, you each win Gryffindor five points. Now, if you're not hurt at all, you'd better head back to Gryffindor Tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

They hurried out of the bathroom and back to the Tower.

"You do realize that you're insane, right Harry?" Hermione asked him. "And that we got extremely lucky and by all right should be dead right now?"

Harry shrugged. "Eh, I got us 25 points, why are you complaining?"

"You're right," Ron said, coming up to stand by Hermione. "He is mental."

Harry smiled. There was nothing like a little near-death experience to help forge a friendship. The others hurried off to go get plates and Harry was about to join them when a thought struck him. He knew what had happened now, why things had changed.

Sirius had also fallen through the Veil.

Review Please!

Chapter Six

Disclaimer: I still do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Yeah, I am skipping quite a bit of time, but to be fair the actual books do skip a lot of time, too, or else the year would just drag on

As much as Harry wanted to find a way to contact Sirius (after all, he hadn't seen the man in eight years and with Sirius, at least, he didn't have to pretend to be a near-stranger, unlike everybody else he'd met again), he knew that he couldn't. Not yet. He wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to monitor his mail once he learned of Sirius's escape; not to be nosy or anything, but to keep Harry safe from what he thought was a huge threat. And at the Dursley's, where he had no one to monitor him twenty-four seven, it would be even worse. No, Harry would have to wait until Sirius contacted him. The problem being, of course, that Sirius had no way of knowing that Harry knew all about what had really happened with Pettigrew and those Muggles and the Secret Keeper Switch. And yes, he would have to return to the Dursley's, at least this year. After all, he really had nowhere else to go and Mrs. Weasley had the unfortunate habit of taking Dumbledore's word as law.

Harry also couldn't just go up and capture Pettigrew now for a number of reasons, not least of all that he had never taken the time to learn how to cast the spell to reveal an animagus. As a first year, he really shouldn't know what an animagus WAS and, given his lack of contact with any of his father's old friends, had no way of knowing that Peter was a rat and even less cause to think it was Scabbers. If he took this up with an adult, they wouldn't believe him and Scabbers would probably move on to another wizarding family, knowing his cover was blown. No, as vexing as it was, he'd have to wait until he heard from Sirius again.

Shortly after the incident on Halloween (which, of course, just invited more staring but did also have the unexpected side effect of convincing Fred and George that Percy wasn't a lost cause after all due to his part in their little escapade) was Harry's first Quidditch match. He wasn't really nervous as Draco Malfoy, though admittedly quite talented for an eleven-year-old and the best Slytherin House

had to offer, had nothing on him. He could fly circles around Ginny back when she was on a professional Quidditch team. Harry wished he had joined one instead of becoming an Auror straightaway, but then again, it was right after the fall of Voldemort and he felt like he had a moral obligation to help round up all of his followers. Maybe this time, if he could end the war quicker or (if he was sufficiently brilliant/lucky) prevent it from taking place at all. Then he could play all the professional Quidditch he wanted before he reached thirty or so and had to retire (to become an Auror). Come to think of it, becoming an Auror while in possession of the world's most powerful and death-attracting wand probably wasn't the best plan, was it?

The game started off innocently enough. Draco and Harry flew around aimlessly, searching for the Snitch. Harry hoped he'd be able to catch it before Quirrell thought to jinx his broom, but fate did not seem to be on his side. The second he did spot the Snitch, Flint slammed into him and one of the twins shot a Bludger at Draco. Naturally, in the confusion, the Snitch disappeared.

A few minutes later, to Harry's great annoyance, his broom started lurching. Harry groaned. He'd forgotten about that. Now, if he didn't do something quickly, Ron and Hermione would jump to conclusions about Snape and Harry really didn't want to set the precedent of blaming Snape every time anything went wrong. Not to mention he didn't want to have to actually start defending Snape until he absolutely had to as he really didn't like his Potions Professor and so saying nice things about him made him nauseous. Petty, perhaps, but Snape was worse.

The best thing to do would be to start a counter curse and hope that his and Snape's combined efforts would be enough to stabilize the broom. Unfortunately, counter curses to such things as bewitched brooms had been the sort of thing he'd resolved to look up later and so that was out. He could take his chances that Snape could stop Quirrell, but he vaguely recalled Quirrell saying something about how he only needed a few more seconds to knock Harry off his broom when Hermione knocked him over. And come to think of it, why in the world would Quirrell try such a public and clearly not accidental method to kill him? Idiot.

Well, if the two obvious answers were out, Harry might have to try something slightly unconventional. He saw the Snitch down below him, to the left but heading his way. If he timed this just right...

Harry stood up and jumped off his broom. There were gasps all around the stadium-it was clear that Harry had done this on purpose. As Harry fell through the air, he could only hope he'd reach the Snitch before someone thought to do something to slow him down, like Dumbledore did that time Dementors crashed that Quidditch game he had against Hufflepuff in his third year. Which was another reason why Quirrell was an idiot: there was no way people would just let him fall to his death. Really, why did he even bother?

Sure enough, Harry started to slow down. No! He was so close! Desperately, Harry twisted himself into a position to make him fall faster. Closer, closer...There! Harry's hand shot and grabbed the Snitch. He chanced a look over at Snape, who rolled his eyes at the fact that Harry was obviously more concerned about winning than landing uninjured. He was the only one who seemed to have thought to slow Harry down, though, so Harry supposed he should be grateful. He was definitely going to do everything in his power to make sure that Snape survived Voldemort's second bid for power and didn't become one of the most hated wizards in Britain (well, not any more than he already was among those who didn't...appreciate...his unique style of teaching. Seriously, didn't they have a seminar all potential teachers had to attend or something?).

Harry landed gently on his feet. That surprised him; he'd expected Snape to just let him fall when he was close enough to the ground to not get hurt. Then he remembered that Snape was rather bad at flying and figured he landed on his ass one or two times too many for him to do it to Harry.

Triumphant, Harry held up the Snitch. Within seconds, he was mobbed by the rest of his team.

"Good game," he managed to tell Draco as he was being dragged away to Hagrid's hut by Ron, Hermione, and (surprisingly) Neville. "I really lucked out that the Snitch just happened to be right in the path of my fall, huh?"

"It was Snape!" Ron declared, once at Hagrid's. "Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," Hagrid insisted. "What would Snape do somethin' like that?"

"Doesn't Snape do all that whenever we have Potions?" Neville asked.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, I do tend to provoke him a bit." At Hermione's Look, he amended, "Okay, a lot. But he's not going to try and kill me for it and he DEFINITELY isn't stupid enough to try anything in front of the whole school. He'd probably try to poison me."

"But Harry, I know a jinx when I see one; I've read all about them! You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!" Hermione said urgently.

"Even if you ignore the fact that, as Neville pointed out, that kind of behavior is par for the course when Snape sees me, Snape was probably trying to stop me from falling off. I mean, he may not be a very good teacher, but he's not so bad as to actively try to murder his students. Besides, he was the one to slow me down when I jumped off so I didn't break anything."

Hermione crossed her arms. "Okay, I'll bite. If it wasn't Snape, who was cursing your broom?"

"Quirrell."

Hermione's eyes bulged out. "What?"

"That's even less likely than it bein' Snape," Hagrid added helpfully.

Ron just stared at Harry.

Neville was the only one who thought to ask, "Why do you think that? I mean, Professor Snape is much scarier and evil-looking than Professor Quirrell."

"Exactly," Harry nodded. "So if it's that obvious that he's evil to a bunch of first years, Dumbledore would have probably picked up on it." Harry paused. Dumbledore did have the slight tendency to be optimistic to the point of foolishness. "Or at least Professor McGonagall."

"But wouldn't he have to trust Quirrell, too, since he's also a teacher?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "Nah, it's Quirrell's first year. Plus, I talked to some of the older students and it turns out that there's some sort of curse on the position."

Hermione looked skeptical. "A CURSE on a JOB?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, how else do you explain that nobody's lasted longer than a year for forty years?" Hermione didn't have an answer, so Harry went on. "And it can't be Snape because his turban doesn't make my scar hurt."

Hermione rolled her eyes like 'Oh god, not this again.'

"But Snape doesn't wear a turban," Ron said, confused.

"Exactly. Quirrell does though and I've learned that people in turbans are not to be trusted."

"How many people have you met who've worn turbans, Harry?" Hermione asked him.

"Well, only the one," Harry admitted. "But he just tried to kill me! And to answer your question, Neville, while we all know that Snape hated my father with a passion and seems to think I'm James Potter reincarnate, he hasn't once mentioned my mother. He's insulted me on everything else in my life but her, which seems strange. Do you have any idea why, Hagrid?"

Hagrid, who was looking more uneasy at the second at the thought of Hogwarts Professors hired by Dumbledore out to kill Harry,

brightened immediately. “Oh yeh, they were great friends, yer mum and Snape. At least til that fight at the end o’ their sixth year.”

“Then why does he pick on you so much?” Neville asked.

“Well, I look like my dad, right? Apparently I have my mother’s eyes, though, and have you ever noticed he never makes eye contact with me? Besides,” at this Harry grinned. “It’s not like I don’t give as good as I get.”

--

The next month just flew by and Harry was surprised to wake up one day and realize that it was almost Christmas. He really needed to get a move on with those Christmas gifts. He also paid the Weasley twins ten galleons apiece in order to have snowballs constantly following Quirrell around and bouncing off the back of his turban where Harry knew Voldemort was. They didn’t want to accept that much money at first, but then Harry explained that by ‘constantly’ he meant ‘until the snow melts.’ They’d even managed to prevent the snow from melting inside and vanishing whenever any other teacher was nearby. Pure genius.

One day, after Potions ended, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville (who still persisted to hang out with them, which Harry thought was odd, but then, he was used to a trio. Maybe it was time to get used to the idea of a quartet? Even Ginny hadn’t managed to really join them once she and Harry had started dating, but then, Ginny had started trying in their sixth year not first) happened by Hagrid on their way to the Great Hall.

“Hi Hagrid, want any help?” Ron asked, figuring it was the polite thing to do even if he wasn’t exactly sure how to help.

“Nah, I’m all right, thanks Ron,” Hagrid replied, realizing the same thing.

“Would you mind moving out of the way?” Malfoy asked impatiently. “Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be a gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose – that hut

of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what you're family's used to."

Harry met Neville's eye and they both moved forward to hold Ron back as he started to lunge at Draco.

"And just how would you know what Ron's house looks like?" Harry asked. "Are you some sort of stalker?"

Draco looked surprised. "What? Of course not!"

"I don't know, it kind of sounds like you are. What do you think Ron?" Harry hoped that by involving Ron in a verbal battle they could avoid a physical one.

"I think you're right," Ron agreed, still straining against them but starting to calm down.

"Besides, didn't we already have this discussion about how not everyone can be Manor Lords?" Harry asked. "Honestly, you'd think the scion of wealthy Pureblood families would have a better long-term memory."

"Oh, I know," Neville agreed. His short-term memory had improved dramatically since getting away from the pressure of being expected to live up to his parents' legacy by his well-meaning but misguided relatives and finding friends who didn't keep comparing him to them (and Harry had even gone out of his way to criticize the way his relatives had piled those unrealistic expectations on him his whole life). He was still scared of Professor Snape, however, who was at that very moment coming up behind Malfoy.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked silkily, eyeing the still-struggling Ron.

"Nothing much," Harry said brightly. "Just a friendly discussion on whether or not all the inbreeding affects one's memory."

"Then how do you explain Mr. Weasley?"

"Well, Ron's a Pureblood so he got kind of offended," Harry explained.

"Why wasn't Mr. Longbottom equally offended?" Snape asked.

Harry looked to Neville.

"I often wonder the same thing myself," Neville said, thinking quickly. "Merlin knows I've had my share of memory problems over the years." He paused. "Or at least I think I have."

Snape looked to Malfoy, who remained quiet, not wanting to admit that he'd provoked them when they hadn't even responded properly and so the Potions Professor just shook his head. "Move along, all of you."

"I am going to kill him," Ron announced.

"Make sure you at least do it after he does something to deserve it," Hermione advised, knowing there was little sense in trying to reason with him when he was like this. "And anyway, Neville, that was brilliant."

He blushed. "Thanks."

--

On Christmas morning, Harry woke up to a larger stack of presents than he'd expected. Of course, it was still much smaller than he was used to, but he was fairly certain it was bigger than he had received his first first year.

"Merry Christmas," Ron said sleepily as he stumbled over to his pile.

"You too," Harry replied, picking up the first present.

All in all, it was a good haul. He got a wooden flute from Hagrid, a fifty-pence piece from Aunt Petunia (which he gave to Ron), death threats from Uncle Vernon (no doubt for his parting words at the station), a Weasley sweater and fudge from Molly, Chocolate Frogs from Hermione, his father's invisibility cloak from Dumbledore,

Pranking 101 from the twins, a broom servicing kit from Draco, and a photo of his Mum and Dad (along with Frank and Alice) from Neville. Harry was especially happy with the last present. Yes, this was a much better haul than before.

Harry looked up at the sound of Ron gasping. "Harry...is this what I think it is?"

"That depends," Harry grinned. "On what exactly you think it is."

"A Nimbus 2000," Ron breathed. "But...but Harry, I don't even..."

"Don't worry about it," Harry told him. "Your mother made me a sweater because you knew my relatives wouldn't bother and I got you a broom so you can have an advantage when you're playing the twins because they are good."

Ron looked torn between accepting the gift and bristling at what he still considered charity. Finally, his desire to have a top-of-the-line broom for once in his life one out. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"Hey, what are friends for?"

Just then, the door flung open and Fred and George bounded in.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Thanks for the book on becoming Animagus!"

"Most people just get us books on pranks-"

"Which are nice-"

"But you can't rely too much on those-"

"As great pranksters must always be original."

Harry smiled. "Don't go rushing things and getting hurt, but see if you can manage it before you graduate."

"You're on," they agreed.

In addition to Ron and the twins, Harry got thick wooly socks for Dumbledore (anonymously, of course), a book on Herbology for Neville, hair care products for Draco (he really wished he had a camera to see the look on his face, although he clearly used something on his hair), Hogwarts a History for Hermione (so she wouldn't have to keep checking it out), a sickle for the Dursleys in return for the fifty-pence, and The Monster Book of Monsters for Hagrid (since he already knew he would enjoy it).

"What's all that noise?" Percy asked, sticking his head into the doorway.

His brothers, who had been in the middle of discussing their sweaters, looked up at him.

"P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Harry got one," Fred said.

"I guess she didn't hear the real story behind the troll, huh?" George added.

"I – don't – want–" Percy protested as the twins forced the jumper over his head.

"And you're not sitting with the Prefects today, either," said George. "Christmas is a time for family."

And with that, the five headed down to Christmas dinner. Strange, though, Percy didn't seem to be nearly as reluctant to spend time with them as he wanted them to think.

Review please!

Chapter Seven

Disclaimer: I still do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Yeah, I looked back and Ron didn't give Harry a Christmas present. I wanted to keep the presents of everyone who gave Harry a present last time the same and I guess I just assumed that he HAD sent him a present, but he didn't and that's kind of weird. Unless, of course, you count the Weasley sweater, but he didn't seem to anticipate that his mom would send Harry anything, so I don't think that really counts.

Other Note: I'm sure everyone thinks Harry is quite strange, but none of them have any frame of reference to compare his behavior to, so for all they know, he was always like this.

There weren't a lot of people staying for the holidays, but it was certainly more than had stayed during his second year. Harry elected to sit by a pretty blonde witch who looked like a sixth or seventh year.

"Hi," Harry greeted. "Do you mind if we sit here?"

"Wotcher, Harry," she greeted. "And no, I don't mind."

Harry froze. She looked nothing like her, but her voice sounded so familiar AND she had used her trademark greeting. "Tonks?" he asked uncertainly.

She cocked her head at him. "Do I know you?"

"Not exactly," Harry admitted. "But I took it upon myself to research my godfather's family members after he broke out of Azkaban."

"Family members?" Fred asked, staring at Tonks.

"Godfather?" Tonks repeated, staring at Harry.

Harry nodded. "Yep, my godfather is none other than one Sirius Black. You're his cousin, right?"

"My mum is," Tonks explained. "That's why I'm here. Given the sheer number of Azkaban inmates I'm related to, my mum has always had policy where every time one of my Death Eater relatives breaks out of Azkaban, I have to stay at Hogwarts where it's safe. Needless to say, this is the first time we've actually had to put this into practice."

"You're RELATED to Sirius Black?" Ron asked, stricken.

Tonks eyed him critically. "You're a Weasley, right?" At Ron's nod, she continued, "You are too, just not as closely related."

Ron looked faint.

"Of course, you're not as closely related to Sirius as you are to Draco," Harry added, smirking.

Ron groaned.

"What do you know about me?" Harry asked, curious as to what the other houses made of him this time.

Tonks snorted. "Please, everyone knows you."

"But what do they say about me?" Harry pressed

"They say you have a death wish," Tonks responded cheerfully. "Is it true that you went chasing after a full-grown troll because you were bored?"

"Well, kind of," Harry said sheepishly. "But if anyone asks it was because I was so distraught that Sirius escaped that I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Personally, I think you're just nuts," Tonks offered.

Harry nodded. "That works, too. Just don't tell the Prophet. I've got a good thing going here, being able to do or say whatever because everyone seems to idolize my forehead, and I wouldn't want anything to compromise that."

"I promise," Tonks laughed.

"So you're a seventh year?" Percy asked.

"Yeah," Tonks confirmed. "I'm a Hufflepuff."

"So you can tell me all about OWLS!" Percy said excitedly.

"Here he goes again," Fred sighed.

"He does this whenever he talk to someone who's already taken them," George confided.

"The week we took OWLS was the worst week of my life," Tonks declared.

The twins exchanged glances.

"You know, we could really use all the help we could get..." George began.

Tonks groaned.

--

"That girl was strange," Ron commented as they made their way back to the Common Room that evening.

"Yeah, she is," Harry agreed. "But I like her."

"So do I. That was the most productive meal I've had in quite some time," Percy said happily.

"She looked like she was really regretting letting us sit down," Harry noticed.

"Why?" Now Percy was confused.

"SOME people don't enjoy discussing exams they took a year and a half ago at Christmas, Perce," Fred told him.

"But you only let me ask her about them for twenty minutes," Percy protested.

"Because she was looking homicidal and we were feeling generous," George explained.

"What? I—" Percy began.

Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder. "Hey, mate, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure," Harry said surprised and they headed up to their dormitory, ignoring the three older Weasley brothers continued debate about the merits of rehashing exams.

Ron stared at the ground, looking extremely uncomfortable. "Listen, I know you must have spent a fortune on my present and I know I didn't get you anything. I'm sorry about that and I feel really bad but I just...I don't have any money. I know you're not the type to flaunt your wealth like Malfoy and some of the others, but it's pretty obvious that you have money. I couldn't afford to buy anything, mum had to make the sweater and fudge she sent you and, well...what could I have possibly gotten someone like you?"

Poor Ron. It's not like Harry was trying to make him insecure, but he had been a little blasé about the ridiculous amount of fame and fortune he possessed, having been long used to it and used to Ron being long used to it, too. It made sense that he was a little overwhelmed.

Harry put a hand on his best friend's shoulder. "Ron, look at me." Ron did, reluctantly. "You gave me your friendship when I had no one. The only other person I even knew was Hagrid, and he had to be nice to me, he was a representative of the school and knew my parents. You didn't have to be and even though it took a bit, you remain one of the only people here who can see past my scar and you have no idea how much that meant to me."

"It didn't seem like it. You've been nothing but confident since the moment I met you," Ron countered.

Well, technically this was true, but really only because of Ron and Hermione the first time around. "Ron, you saw what my relatives sent. Enough money to buy a small piece of candy and death threats. I've never had ANYONE until I met you and that's more important than any broomstick."

"Do you mean it?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Of course," Harry smiled. "But I will be expecting something for my birthday. July 31st, write it down."

Ron laughed and they headed back downstairs to play wizard's chess.

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"Hey Ron," Harry shook him awake early that morning. Quite early, in fact, as it could barely be even be called morning.

"Tap-dancing spiders!" Ron shouted as he shot up, knocking Harry to the floor. "Huh? You're not a tap-dancing spider."

"No, I'm not," Harry gritted his teeth.

"And what are you doing on the floor?"

"Oh, nothing...I just wanted to know if you wanted to use my invisibility cloak to go find a magic mirror."

"Aren't most mirrors magical?" Ron asked skeptically.

"This one shows you things you want, not lectures you about your appearance," Harry explained.

"Sure, why not," Ron said, rubbing his eyes as he headed for the door. Unfortunately, he misjudged the distance to the stairs and fell down all of them. Fortunately, the first year dorms were the closest to the bottom.

"Watch your step," Harry called, a little late, as he grabbed his invisibility cloak and hurried to Ron's side.

"What was that?"

"Sounded like a cannon."

The Weasley twins appeared on the scene.

"Oh, it's just Ron."

"What are you guys doing?"

"Professor Dumbledore finally got around to giving me my father's invisibility cloak back after he felt the need to borrow it for the last ten years or so and so Ron and I decided to go looking for this kickass mirror Dumbledore has around here," Harry explained. "Wanna come?"

The twins stared at him incredulously.

"Do you even need-

"to ask?"

Hm, the twins tended to do the whole twinspeak thing a long less around Harry, since he could actually tell them apart. Of course, he hadn't seen fit to mention that was because he cast silent identifier spells at them every time they entered the room, but hey. They were bloody identical and enjoyed confusing people. He was really just levelling the playing field.

"What's the meaning of this?" Percy came down the stairs. "It's long past curfew and even though that doesn't technically apply to the Common Rooms, it's far too late to be up and about. You're not planning on sneaking off somewhere, are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Of course not," Fred assured him.

Percy still looked skeptical.

"Harry is though, and he just invited us," George beamed. "And may I just say that I am SO proud."

"Ron, this one is definitely a keeper," Fred told him.

"You can't just—" Percy began.

"It's the holidays, I don't have classes tomorrow and there is nothing you can do short of hexing me that will stop me," Harry interrupted.

"I'll tell Professor McGonagall," Percy threatened.

"So I'll get a couple of detentions, that's not exactly enough to deter me. My relatives would be thrilled to hear I'm doing my utmost to get myself killed, and I honestly do not give a damn about house points."

"Really?" Ron asked, wide-eyed.

"Really. You see, I've come to the conclusion that the 'House Cup' is really more of a 'Suck-up Cup.' After all, the more of a teacher's pet you are, the more points you win. God knows I love Hermione, but she has got to be the biggest teacher's pet I have ever met and guess what? She's the single biggest point winner in our year. I don't care if I lose Gryffindor all of our points because quite frankly I don't want to be a sycophant all year just so the Great Hall gets to be decorated in our colors for one meal and you get an entire train-ride's worth of bragging rights. It's just not worth it," Harry concluded.

"Harry my good friend," George began.

"You might be on to something," Fred finished.

"And by the time you'd find McGonagall, we'd be long gone. So how about it, Percy? Would you really stoop so low as to hex a first year?" Harry challenged.

"I...no," Percy said, defeated. "But I'm coming with you to make sure you don't do anything stupid." Percy paused. "Well, anything stupider than this," he amended.

Harry shrugged. "The more the merrier."

--

"You're lost, aren't you?" Ron asked as they walked past the same portrait for the third time.

"No I'm not," Harry insisted.

"But we've been past here," Ron countered.

"I know what I'm doing."

"He's lost," Fred said.

"I kn-What the..." George trailed off as a door appeared in front of them.

"That door wasn't there a minute ago," Percy said, peering intently at it.

"I know. It's a MAGIC door," Harry explained. "Come on, let's go."

Harry opened the door and they all went in. In the center of the room was a huge mirror with an elaborate golden frame and standing on two clawed feet. The inscription read "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi."

"What the hell does that even mean?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Beats me, I always figured it was some obscure language that only really old people with nothing better to do with their time understood. I know it's called the Mirror of Erised."

There was a moment of silence and then Percy said slowly, "I show not your face but your heart's desire."

"Um, that's great Perce-" said Fred.

"But what does that have to do with-"

"The price of dragon's eggs-"

"In France?" George asked.

Percy rolled his eyes. "It's obviously backwards."

"Obviously," Fred mimicked.

"Really?" Harry asked, looking closer at the inscription. "I show not your...you're right! That's amazing."

"It wasn't that hard," Percy said, but he looked pleased.

"So take a look," Harry invited. He looked in the mirror and saw Ginny holding a baby with messy black hair. Ron and Hermione stood next to her holding Teddy's hand.

"What do you see?" Ron asked, hesitant to step in front of the mirror without knowing what to expect.

"My family," came the quiet answer.

"I see our own joke shop!" George exclaimed. "Sweet!"

"I do, too. And I see Angel-I mean, that's really a nice joke shop," said Fred, looking a little embarrassed.

"I see myself as the Head Boy and the Quidditch captain," Ron announced.

"Grand plans," Harry remarked. "Can you even BE the Head Boy and Quidditch captain at the same time?"

The twins looked mildly ill at the prospect of yet ANOTHER Head Boy wannabe in their family and Percy looked thrilled at the thought of

someone following in his footsteps. When Percy finally stepped in front of the mirror, he gasped.

"Minister of Magic?" Fred asked.

"Probably," George agreed.

Harry didn't think so, though. He sidled up to Percy and spoke quietly. "You see your family accepting you." It wasn't a question.

Percy looked startled. "How did you-"

"Not all dreams are impossible, Percy."

- -

Harry's life soon settled back into a monotonous routine (or as monotonous as anything ever was since Harry had decided on a devil may care approach to his second chance) until one Quidditch practice where Oliver Wood announced that Snape would be refereeing Gryffindor's next match against Hufflepuff. Harry had forgotten about that, but it wasn't really very big in the grand scheme of things. What DID interest Harry was the fact that this would provide him with his first opportunity to approach Cedric since he arrived. Granted, reacquainting himself with Tonks (for he did make an effort to see her whenever he could) was a complete and total accident and a result of Sirius's decision to escape while Tonks was still at school, but he found he rather liked seeing her again after all these years. He hadn't been nearly as close to Cedric, but his death had a profound impact on him too.

"That certainly sounds like a bit of a conflict of interest," was Harry's only comment. "You'd think they'd have a teacher who wasn't a Head of House be the referee if they weren't going to use Madame Hooch." Of course, the WHY of the matter eluded him. Was this yet more evidence pointing towards Madame Hooch being a Squib? Though Harry wasn't quite sure how much being up in the air with him would help Snape stop another attempt, especially as he'd need to actually pay attention to the going-ons for the other players.

"Shouldn't you be a little more concerned about the fact that he's going to blatantly cheat?" Wood asked.

"Well, I would, but the referee can only do so much and the 150 points I get when I catch the Snitch will definitely help on our way to the Cup. And besides, since he's doing it for me, I'm kind of obligated to be a bit, dare I say it, grateful," Harry shuddered at the thought.

Everyone stared at him.

"Harry, I don't quite think that Snape—" George began.

"Is going to be blatantly biased towards Hufflepuff for your sake—" Fred continued.

"Unless you have money on them or something," George ended.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh please. And he's doing it to make sure that Quirrell doesn't try to kill me again."

That set off a whole new round of questions.

--

When Harry had finally finished answering everyone's questions and changed, forty-five minutes had elapsed. Honestly, it was like a bloody press conference, he reflected wryly as he headed to Gryffindor Tower to tell Ron and Hermione the news.

He had just finished convincing Ron that his safety was, in fact, more important than a Quidditch game and he couldn't always jump off of his broom or else it would get old, when Neville showed up.

"Hey guys," he said cheerfully. "You'll never guess who I just ran into."

"Who?" Hermione asked.

"Malfoy."

"And you're...happy...about this?" Ron couldn't believe it. "Bloody hell, first Harry, now Neville...Stay strong Hermione! Don't give in to his temptation!"

Hermione giggled. "I'll...try not to, Ron."

"So, what happened?" Harry asked, for once the one to bring everybody back on topic. He vaguely remembered a conversation like this, but Neville had been much more upset...

"Oh, right. Well, I ran into him outside of the library and he said he'd been looking for someone to practice on," Neville explained. "He shot a Leg-Locker curse at me."

"And this makes him happy," Ron remarked. "Either Neville's got some strange preferences or Malfoy's spell is stronger than I thought..."

Hermione ignored him. "What did you do?"

"Dodged it and ran like hell," Neville grinned.

"Nice," Harry approved.

"You should have hexed him back," Ron told him.

"No he shouldn't have!" Hermione said, scandalized.

"Would YOU have wanted to just stand there and face off by yourself against Malfoy and his two half-troll bodyguards?" Neville asked rhetorically.

Harry finally managed to place the situation. "You're worth twelve of Malfoy," he echoed his words of twelve years prior. "And don't you forget it."

Review Please!

Chapter Eight

Disclaimer: I still don't own Harry Potter.

The day before the match, Harry was flying around the Quidditch Pitch idly when he saw Cedric Diggory on the ground, holding a broom and watching him.

"Spying on me?" Harry asked as he landed.

Cedric shook his head. "Hardly. And I've already seen you play, remember?"

"You go to matches you're not playing?" Harry asked, surprised.

Cedric stared at hm. "Of course, it's helpful to see how the other team flies. Are you saying you don't?"

Harry shook his head ruefully. "Well, I would, but I always get so frustrated whenever I spot the Snitch and the Seekers are oblivious. It's really not good for my blood pressure."

"You could always watch the other players," Cedric suggested.

"I could, but unless one team has scored fifteen more goals than the other, the other players don't matter all that much in the outcome of the match, so I never really see the point," Harry confided.

"Seeker bias," Cedric laughed. "I completely understand."

"Good," Harry said, relieved. "Everyone else thinks I'm crazy."

"From what I've heard, you are. We haven't been properly introduced, have we? I'm Cedric Diggory," he said, sticking his hand out.

"Harry Potter," Harry replied, shaking his hand. "First Tonks, now you...Does everyone here think I'm crazy?"

"Pretty much," Cedric said cheerfully. "That's not necessarily a bad thing, though. Hogwarts and the Wizarding World in general have

been stuck to the status quo for far too long and it's about time someone came and shook things up, even if I'm sure your motives are far less noble."

"So why are you out here then?" Harry asked. "Trying to get one more practice in before the match tomorrow?"

"Sort of. This is my first year on the team and you're HARRY POTTER and insanely good at flying and don't mind jumping off your broom to catch the Snitch and I'm just not sure that my sanity's damaged enough to let me pull the kind of stunts that you probably will to win. Nymphadora eventually got so tired of watching me pace that she kicked me out of the Common Room."

"Wow," Harry said, his eyes wide as saucers.

"What?" Cedric asked.

"How did you get her to let you call him Nymphadora? I've been trying for weeks and I haven't had any luck." More like years, but no need to tell him that.

Cedric laughed. "She lost a bet last year. And before you get any ideas, she's vowed to never again let the use of her first name be a part of a bet."

"Because she lost once?" Harry complained. "That's not fair."

"Twice, actually. Charlie Weasley apparently won a bet with her four years ago and wanted the same thing."

"Damn. There goes that plan..."

- -

The next day, Ron, Hermione, and Neville wished him luck outside of the locker rooms, clearly wondering whether he'd survive the match.

"Oh, relax guys. Not only is Snape not out to kill me and on hand to make sure nothing goes wrong, but given what happened last time,

Professor Dumbledore will probably be here as well. I'll be fine," he assured them.

"You thought last time went fine, too, and you ended up jumping off of your broom," Neville pointed out.

"So? We won," Ron and Harry said at the same time.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Just...try and be careful, okay?"

"I'm always careful," Harry assured her as he headed into the locker room.

"I was afraid he was going to say that..." Hermione said, gazing worriedly after him.

Unfortunately for Harry, he didn't find the Snitch as easily as he had the last time he played this match. He supposed that made sense; finding the Snitch in five minutes had been a rarity once, doing it again in the same match twelve years later (well, for him, anyway) was downright impossible.

He looked over at the stands and saw Ron and Neville taking on Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle and briefly wondered what that was about. Oliver had only let three goals in while they had scored eight. At around forty minutes into the game, he noticed the Snitch hovering around his ear. Feeling slightly anticlimactic, he reached up and plucked it from the air. Game over.

--
In the weeks that followed, Hermione had begun to obsess about the exams, which were still two and a half months away. She had tried to get Ron, Neville, and Harry to follow the schedules she had drawn up for them, but even though Neville found her methods quite helpful, Harry had refused outright. Quite apart from his twelve-year advantage placing him at the top of the class, no one ever actually failed first year, and given some of the older students at Hogwarts, that was really saying something. In fact, Harry didn't quite think that it was possible to fail until fifth year (and he had, in fact, not even

taken the exams fourth year, so they couldn't be that important). Needless to say, Hermione was not pleased to hear this, but there was really nothing she could do to make Harry study, so she harped on Ron twice as hard.

Still, his friends were constantly doing homework and everyone in the castle it seems was studying for exams, and so he spent far more time than he'd like to in the library. On one such afternoon, he was flipping idly through the pages of *Quidditch Through the Ages* when he heard Ron call out, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

"Looking for a book to read?" Harry suggested. "I mean, what else would he possibly be doing in here, hitting on Madame Pince?"

"Jus' looking," Hagrid confirmed.

"Unless I missed my guess, you just came from the dragon section," Harry said casually. "And don't even give me that look, guys! I'm spending more time in here than I am sleeping; I need something to occupy my time!"

"You could try studying," Hermione suggested, but Harry ignored her.

"You wouldn't happen to be looking into raising a dragon, would you?" Harry asked innocently.

"Wait, you don't actually have a dragon, do you?" Neville asked quietly. "I mean, that would explain why you're keeping all the windows shut and a fire going despite the fact that it's spring."

"How would you know that? We haven't been down to see him in a couple of weeks," Ron pointed out.

"Oh, well I'm helping Professor Sprout out with the Greenhouses and I always say hi to Hagrid while I'm down there. The past four days, though..." Neville trailed off. "So are you?"

"Maybe..." Hagrid admitted.

"Hasn't that been illegal for, what, two hundred years?" Harry asked.

"Technically..."

"That settles it," Hermione said, putting her books in her bag. "We're going to go down and see this."

Even though Ron didn't particularly want to go and stare at an egg in a virtual inferno, he was pretty excited to be doing something other than studying and he quickly gathered up everyone's things.

--

"I can't believe it...I just can't believe it..." Hermione was muttering as they followed Harry back up to the castle. "How could he be so irresponsible? He lives in a small, wooden house and has no means for providing a safe and adequate environment for a baby dragon, not to MENTION they're illegal."

"Where are we going?" Ron interrupted her.

"I don't know about you, but I'm going to go see Professor Dumbledore," Harry said.

"You're going to tell him about Hagrid?" Neville asked. At Harry's nod, he continued, "But won't he get in trouble?"

"He might," Harry admitted. "But Dumbledore's always been good at covering up things that go on at the school and I'm sure he can come up with a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why we have a baby dragon on our hands."

"But Hagrid's counting on us!" Ron protested.

"True enough," Harry nodded. "On the other hand, Hagrid, as much as I love him, seems to be almost completely lacking common sense and I think we can all agree that the dragon has got to go. We're four eleven-year-olds; this really can't be our responsibility. The best thing to do in this situation is to turn it over to the responsible adults who should be taking care of this and that means going to Professor Dumbledore. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. Wow, first try," he

remarked as the Gargoyle's guarding the Headmaster's office sprung aside.

"Harry?" Professor Dumbledore looked up, surprised, as his office was invaded by four first year students. "Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom? What are you doing here?"

Harry noticed that despite the fact that they'd never actually spoken in this timeline (mostly because first years didn't really have much cause for interacting with the infinitely important Albus Dumbledore but partly because he wasn't quite sure what to say to the man, even now, seven years after his death. Or five years before, however you looked at it), Dumbledore used his first name. Interesting.

"Um, well, Professor Dumbledore, sir, Harry here wanted to see if you could, well, help with a problem we have, or discovered, really—" Hermione was clearly flustered to be speaking to the Headmaster of Hogwarts and Head of the Wizengamot for the first time.

Harry decided to put her out of her misery. "Hagrid found a dragon egg and he doesn't seem to understand that it's not legal or safe for him to raise it, especially at a school. We were hoping that, seeing as how we're eleven and you're a responsible adult, you'd take care of it."

Dumbledore peered at him over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "You're certain of this?"

Harry bit back a smart remark. He really would prefer to not have to deal with this personally, so he'd have to make a real effort to be respectful. "Yes sir."

"I see. Well, I must commend you for bringing this straight to me. Most students, I've found, tend to take care of these sorts of things alone, which can end badly. Five points to Gryffindor for each of you for your wisdom in getting a teacher involved."

As soon as they were back in the hallway, Harry groaned. "Oh great, at this rate we'll never lose the House Cup."

"Most people wouldn't see this as a problem, Harry," Hermione told him, confused.

"But I do because it's the Suck-Up Cup, remember?" When Hermione shook her head, Harry continued, "Oh, right, you weren't there. Either way, I believe that the House Cup is a school-wide conspiracy to try and spawn as many teacher's pets as they can and encourage teacher's pet-like behavior in everyone. Snape and I are doing all we can, but we can't lose Gryffindor the House Cup alone!"

Hermione just stared at him. "You have problems."

--

The exams were, of course, ridiculously easy. Flitwick wanted them to make a pineapple tap-dance across a desk and he made it tap not only across the desk but on the floor, up the wall, and on the ceiling, too. McGonagall wanted them to turn a mouse into a snuffbox and (after complaining, as he always did, how inhumane it was to turn living creatures into inanimate objects) his was jewel-encrusted. Snape wanted them to brew a Forgetfulness Potion with no directions and Harry did it with his eyes literally closed. Not to mention how he did on the written tests. Honestly, first year end of the year exams juts weren't written for twenty-three year olds, no matter how little they actually paid attention in class.

The night the exams finished, the Trio plus Neville (Harry had never really liked the term quartet, it always reminded him of an orchestra for some reason) were sitting in the Common Room, enjoying the fact that exams were over.

Still, events being as they were, Harry would have to destroy the peace. "So," Harry said casually. "My scar told me that Professor Dumbledore's in London right now and Quirrell is taking advantage of his absence to go after the Philosopher's Stone."

"What?" Ron, who had been drifting off, sat up, suddenly wide awake.

"Philosopher's Stone? There's a Philosopher's Stone at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked, her voice higher than usual.

"Well, yeah. I mean, what else do you think is in that one third floor corridor we're forbidden to go to under pain of death?" Harry asked rhetorically.

"Why would anyone hide something like THAT in a school full of children?" Neville asked sensibly.

Harry laughed. "That is a damn good question. The fact remains that he did, though, and I get that I should have probably mentioned this before now, but I'm going after Quirrell and nothing you can do will stop me, so I was wondering whether you'd like to come with me or stay here and hope I don't get killed."

Twenty minutes later, after Hermione tried everything she could think of to convince him to stay or at least give a better reason for why he was going, the four of them were heading out the portrait hole.

"Where are you going?" Percy demanded. "Don't you know it's past curfew."

Harry smiled pleasantly. "Oh, I know. I just don't care."

--

"We are so going to get expelled for this," Hermione grumbled as they made their way towards the third floor corridor.

"Oh we will not," Harry disagreed. "We're only breaking one little rule. I mean, we may die, but they can't possibly expel us because they're stupid enough to think putting Dark Wizard bait in a school full of children is a good idea. Honestly."

"Who's there?" Peeves said, coming from around the corner. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you a ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie? Should call Filch, I should, if soemthing's a-creeping around unseen."

"Hiya Peeves," Harry said brightly, pulling the Invisibility Cloak off of him but leaving it to cover the others.

"Potty?" Peeves asked. "What are you doing?"

"Causing mayhem," Harry said. "I'm endangering myself and three other students by sneaking off to the third corridor. Is that irresponsible enough for you to let us go on our way?"

Peeves considered. "This would be the corridor that Dumblydore said if you go near, you'll die?"

"Yep," Harry confirmed.

"Well, alright," Peeves agreed. "GOT YOUR CONK!" he shouted before zooming off.

"Ow..." Harry said, rubbing his nose. "Don't even laugh guys."

When they did reach the door to the third corridor, it was already open. Harry was surprised, they'd left an hour or so earlier than last time, how early did Quirrell leave? Oh well.

"Now guys, don't panic or anything, but there's a giant three-headed dog in there," Harry said cheerfully.

"A...a what?" Ron asked, clearly panicking.

"Oh, don't worry," Harry said. "It also instantly falls asleep whenever it hears music and I brought the flute Hagrid got me."

Harry entered the room, his friends reluctantly trailing behind. He played the flute and watched as first Neville, then Ron, finally Hermione jumped through the trapdoor. He then, still playing, jumped through himself, wondering idly how in the world they were going to get back up. Oh well, that wasn't his problem, that was Ron and Hermione's.

By the time he landed, he discovered that Neville had already gotten rid of the Devil's Snare. Harry supposed it paid to have a genuine Herbology prodigy with them this time. After all, having a plant try to kill you was highly embarrassing.

They moved on to the next room where they found hundreds of flying keys and a few old broomsticks. "Yeah, I'll deal with this," Harry said, taking his Nimbus 2000 out of his pocket and unshrinking it.

"Do you take that with you everywhere?" Hermione asked him incredulously.

"Yep," Harry nodded.

"Boys..." she muttered, giving him a disgusted look.

Harry took off and, two minutes later, had grabbed the key and landed. He jammed it in the lock and completely ignored the awed silence behind him. So he was, quite possibly, the best flier in Britain. He'd had years of practice, it wasn't all natural talent (not that THEY knew that).

Then they reached the chessboard. Harry groaned. He hated chess. He was also incredibly bad at it, probably worse than an eleven-year-old Ron, so there was really nothing to do but sit back and wait for the game to be over. When it was and Ron lay crumpled on the floor again (seriously, it's like Ron was masochistic or something), Hermione, Neville, and Harry hurried on to the next room, trying not to think too much about the blood pouring out of Ron's head.

He was fine before, he'll be fine now, Harry tried to reassure himself. It wasn't very comforting.

They walked through the room with the unconscious troll and continued to Snape's potion's puzzle. The three of them read Snape's riddle (although, really, wouldn't it just make sense for Snape to simply TELL Professor Dumbledore which bottle was which and then not let anyone else have any idea?) and Hermione began walking up and down the aisle, tapping bottles and muttering to herself. Harry was pleased to note that he figured out which bottle was which a good three minutes before Hermione did. It really did pay to have dozen-year head start sometimes when dealing with someone as brilliant as Hermione.

"So, um...right. There might be enough for two of us to get through to face Quirrell, but definitely not for three of us. I'm going in, of course, and I'm guessing you won't let me go in alone, so I suggest rock, paper, scissors."

After trying to explain to Neville how to play, Hermione chose scissors and Neville (not really grasping the concept) picked rock. Hermione, over-thinking this as usual, decided that Neville wouldn't pick rock twice in a row and so picked scissors again. Unfortunately, Neville did indeed elect to go with rock and she was sent back to go deal with Ron and Dumbledore.

"Even though I won, Hermione gets the better deal," Neville grumbled.

"Oh cheer up, it'll be fun," Harry told Neville, pouring half of the bottle into his hands.

"Fun? Fun? Facing down an evil teacher is your idea of fun?"

"Yep," Harry nodded.

"Hermione's right, you do have problems."

Harry beamed before downing the rest of the bottle.

Review Please!

Chapter Nine

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: This chapter isn't really funny, but then again, they are facing Voldemort for the first time and it isn't just Harry. I think it turned out okay anyway, though.

"Wait...what?" Neville blurted upon crossing the fire. "It really was Quirrell? Damn, now I owe the Weasley Twins money."

"You were betting on who was out to kill me?" Harry asked. "Isn't that a bit...morbid?"

"Oh, like you're one to talk. You bring up your 'facial disfigurement' as you call it every chance you get," Neville pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, well everyone seems to love talking about it, so I figure I was doing them a favor. And at least the Weasley Twins had faith in me!"

Before Neville could answer, Quirrell spoke. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter. I must say, I didn't expect to see Longbottom, though."

Harry looked confused. "Why were you wondering whether you'd see me? I'm bloody eleven; I really should have more sense than to go after a fully-trained wizard who wants to kill me armed only with some of my first-year classmates." Although if he were really eleven, it probably wouldn't have occurred to him to force an adult to listen after getting the brush-off from McGonagall. God knows it hadn't last time. He really should have been more specific about WHY he thought the Stone was in danger.

"Gee, I don't know," Quirrell said sarcastically. "Could it be the fact that every time I face away from you, you insist that your scar is on fire?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer and then abruptly closed it again. "Fair point," he conceded.

"I must say, I didn't honestly expect you to figure it out considering Severus seems so much the type. I mean, who in their right mind would suspect me, p-p-poor st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell when that overgrown bat was swooping around."

"I would."

"Um, Harry? I believe the question was 'who in their right mind', Neville reminded him.

"Oh, right. But maybe I wouldn't have figured it out if you didn't have bloody Tom Riddle on the back of your head."

This was news to all present. Neville had no idea what Harry was talking about in the slightest, Quirrell had no idea who Tom Riddle was, and Tom Riddle had no idea how Harry knew that that was his real name and not Voldemort.

Quirrell evidently decided not to ask and snapped his fingers, tying both Neville and Harry up. Harry cursed himself for forgetting about that and focused on trying to remove the ropes without his wand. He could do it if he had enough time, but he'd need to concentrate.

In the meantime, Quirrell took the opportunity to mutter to himself about how to find the stone.

Suddenly, Voldemort said, "Use the boy...use the boy..."

Neville started. "Would that be Tom Riddle?" he whispered.

Harry merely nodded.

Quirrell rounded on Harry. "Yes – Potter – come here." He undid the ropes surrounding Harry and bade him to look in the mirror.

Unlike the last time when Harry had thought the Stone would be safer in his pocket than in the enchanted mirror that Quirrell couldn't figure out and was frustrated and desperate enough to rely on a child to get it, Harry didn't actually want the stone.

"Well?" Quirrell asked impatiently. "What do you see?"

"I see my family," Harry paused. "Again. Seriously, people, this isn't going to change so stop asking."

"You don't see the stone?" Quirrell asked, disappointed and a little skeptical.

"Why would I want the Stone?" Harry challenged. "It's seems safe enough where it is."

As Harry began to discretely inch away from Quirrell, Voldemort spoke again. "The other boy has it..."

Harry froze. "Dammit!" He really should have mentioned that looking in the mirror was a bad idea.

Quirrell started towards Neville, who, for his part, looked terrified.

"Let me speak to them...face to face..." Voldemort decided.

While Quirrell was making his cursory protest and doing what Voldemort wanted anyway, Harry wandlessly and silently managed to free Neville.

"Ah!" Neville yelped, at seeing the face of Voldemort for the first time.

Harry was calmer. He knew that he could handle Voldemort as he was now, he just wasn't sure about Neville.

"Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom. How ironic that it should be the two of you standing here together to face me. Ironic, yet fitting."

"Tom Riddle. I'm fairly certain you're a pedophile."

Neville nearly choked. He didn't quite know who this was, but he had a nagging feeling that he should.

"You dare..." Voldemort began angrily, although whether he was more upset by the use of his real name or by Harry's accusation, it was hard to say.

"Yeah, I do, let's just skip the part where you're offended I know your name get on with it, shall we?" Harry suggested.

Voldemort was silent for a moment. Then he said, "There was a prophecy, you know."

Harry tensed. What was Voldemort trying to do here? He hadn't said anything of the sort when Harry had first met him before. Was it because of Neville's presence?

"The prophecy told me that there would be a boy born at the end of July whose parents had defied me three times who would stop me. That could have applied to either of you. I chose to attack Harry here and he did indeed stop me. Temporarily. Prophecy fulfilled. So you see, there really is no reason for me to kill you, or your friend for that matter, Neville. Just give me the Stone in your pocket and you have my word that I shall not harm either of you."

"The word of a liar and a murderer," Harry snapped.

"Y-You," Neville swallowed hard. "You destroyed my parents' minds!"

"That wasn't me, Neville, that happened after I was gone. Bellatrix Lestrange, always one of my most faithful if...misguided followers, thought that your parents, as prominent Aurors and widely known to be close to that puppet-master Dumbledore, would know what had happened. I do not condone their actions and I will make them suffer for taking your parents from you, Neville. Just say the word, give me the stone and your parents will be avenged."

Neville was shaking uncontrollably now. "Y-You could have just as easily attacked me and killed MY parents."

"But I didn't," Voldemort's voice was soft, persuasive. "I went after Harry because I didn't want to spill any Pureblood blood unnecessarily in case I chose wrong. Noble Pureblood children such

as yourself are the future, dear Neville. Driving your parents into insanity was such a waste; they were a fine witch and wizard. Once I'm restored, I will rectify every case of worthy Purebloods such as your parents losing everything but their life. I can give you back your parents. Just give me the stone."

Neville was quiet for a long moment. "N-No...I...No."

Before Voldemort could process Neville's refusal, Harry seized the opportunity and leapt at Quirrell, pressing his hands to the man's face.

The pain in Harry's scar was so intense that Harry couldn't see. He knew he should probably have interceded before now, but, somewhat like Dumbledore, he wanted to give Neville an opportunity to deal face Voldemort and figured that refusing to give in to Voldemort even when he was promising everything would do wonders for Neville's still-struggling self-esteem.

Just as Harry was about to pass out, he heard "Reducto!" and Quirrell went still.

He looked up and saw Neville, eyes wide, lower his wand.

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"Oh Harry! Neville!" Hermione cried the minute they exited the corridor. For lack of any better ideas, they had simply rode Harry's broom up through the trapdoor. She immediately hugged them both.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said weakly. "Did you find Professor Dumbledore?"

"Indeed she did," Dumbledore spoke up from behind Harry. How did he? It was best not to ask. "Now, I'm sure you have many questions for me and I know I have a few for you, but first why don't we get you all to the Hospital Wing?"

--

When Madame Pomfrey was done tending to them and Ron and Hermione sent on their way, Dumbledore returned.

“You should probably give Professor Dumbledore the Philosopher’s Stone,” Harry started things off by suggesting.

Neville’s eyes widened. “Oh right! I had completely forgotten about that...”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “You must have had a lot of excitement down there.”

Harry snorted. “Well, that’s one word for it.”

“I killed Professor Quirrell.” Silence followed that declaration and Neville just stared down at his hospital bed, clutching at the sheets. He hadn’t been discharged because he hadn’t stopped shaking once they reached the Hospital Wing.

“What happened?” Dumbledore’s tone was grave.

Sensing Neville probably didn’t want to talk about it, Harry took a deep breath and began. “Quirrell was after the Stone. Ron was taken by the Queen in the Chess match we were playing and there was only enough of the potion to get us through the flames to see Quirrell for two people, so Hermione went back to Ron. The Mirror of Erised was there and Quirrell tried to use me to get the Stone, but I didn’t really want it and so Neville, who apparently wanted to get but not use the Stone, managed to get it instead. This caused Quirrell to unwrap his turban and reveal that he had Voldemort on the back of his head. Voldemort...he promised Neville his parents back if he just handed over the Stone. Neville said no. Voldemort was going to attack Neville so I used my mother’s-sacrifice-magical-love-protection to burn Quirrell’s face and right when I was about to collapse from magical exhaustion, Neville fired a Reducto at him.”

“I killed him,” Neville said again.

“Quirrell was already dead,” Dumbledore told him gently. “He was dead the minute he allowed Voldemort to take up residence in his

body. He would have died anyway the minute Voldemort left him, which he would have done tonight, regardless of if he took the Stone from you and crafted himself a new body or if he failed and decided that poor Quirinus had outlived his usefulness.”

“So it’s not my fault?” Neville sounded dubious.

“No, it’s not,” Harry agreed. He knew that it would take awhile for it to truly sink in and he wished that it hadn’t had to happen this way, but there was nothing he could do about that now. He honestly hadn’t expected Neville to attack Quirrell while he was burning him with his touch. “So, what’s going to happen to the Stone now?” Harry asked, to change the subject onto less depressing matters.

Dumbledore then proceeded to explain how the Flamel’s were all set to die now, but it was okay because they were really old anyway. So, maybe it was only slightly less depressing.

“Do you have any more questions?” Dumbledore asked genially.

“Well, Voldemort did say one interesting thing I was hoping you could explain,” Harry said innocently.

Dumbledore nodded, indicating that he should continue.

“Apparently there was some sort of a prophecy about Neville and I that caused him to come after me,” Harry said slowly, enjoying the sight of all the color draining out of Dumbledore’s face. “Something about me being the only one to stop him?”

“I...did not intend for you to find out like this,” Dumbledore said at last, sighing. “And especially not at such a young age. I had hoped...But alas, what’s done is done, I suppose, and there is no use lamenting the fact. I wish I had a Pensieve with me, but I do not so I will to simply tell you the Prophecy: The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.”

"And that could mean either me or Harry?" Neville asked, looking faint.

"Alas, no, the Prophecy is about Harry. When Voldemort chose to go after Harry and gave him his scar, he marked him and made the Prophecy about him," Dumbledore replied.

Neville tried not to look too relieved as he realized it would not probably be up to Harry to stop Voldemort.

"Um, sir? You realize that I'm eleven, right? And not really the most responsible person around? And you really shouldn't expect me to be the only one who can kill him?"

"I wouldn't dream of expecting anything from you for a few years yet. And, in fact, I cannot make you do anything. On the other hand, by the time that you come face to face with Voldemort for the last time, knowing he wants to kill you, knowing he has killed or tried to kill countless others, you may very well decide that killing him would be for the best. Certainly if he regains a body and does not stop hunting you, chances are very good that either of you will die at the hand of the other."

--

Harry walked to the leaving feast with a heavy heart. Sure Hagrid had gotten him a scrapbook filled with pictures of his parents, he'd spent all night at the impromptu 'We're Graduating' Party the Seventh Years threw (at Tonks' insistence as he didn't really know the other Seventh Years very well), and he'd get to see Ginny again soon. On the other hand, Gryffindor had indeed won the House Cup this year, despite his best efforts to the contrary.

Harry tried his best to appear depressed when Dumbledore announced that Gryffindor was in the lead. On the bright side, this meant no need for last second points.

"Recent events must be taken into account," Dumbledore continued. Harry groaned. Of course they must. Dumbledore awarded Ron fifty points for the 'best-played game of chess Hogwarts had ever seen'

despite the fact that there was really no objective way to measure something like that, Hermione fifty points for not poisoning herself or her classmates, Neville fifty points for lighting a rare and valuable plant on fire, and Harry got sixty points for not telling a responsible adult about Quirrell's attempt to steal the stone and for endangering several of his classmates. Of course, Dumbledore might have phrased it slightly differently, but it was still blatant favoritism.

Harry started banging his head on the table and didn't stop until Percy got so annoyed he threatened to hex him. It really wouldn't do to get Percy in the habit of doing that as his refusal to do so was really the only reason why Harry was able to do some of his more public after-hours activities.

The celebration at the Gryffindor table over finally being the best sycophantic House got so annoying that halfway through the feast Harry got up and went to go sit by the Slytherins. He spent the rest of the feast commiserating with them and complaining about the blatant favoritism. Dumbledore, who couldn't hear what he was saying, smiled broadly at Harry's mature attitude of reaching out across House lines.

--

As the Hogwarts Express was pulling into the station, Harry was honestly glad that the train ride was over, for the first time in his life. He, Ron, Hermione, and Neville had just sat back and let all of Harry's various acquaintances and Neville's Herbology friends come visit them throughout the train ride. Unfortunately, this had not stopped Hermione from pestering Harry about his exam results. So he made the highest first year grades since Dumbledore and was now being hailed as a prodigy (to both of their annoyances), it was really just the twelve year age advantage. After all, being an adult who had to sit through boring meetings and hold press conferences and regularly petition the Wizengamot meant that he officially had an attention span sufficient enough to pay attention in Binns's class so he even did well in History of Magic despite his blatant refusal to study. And that was why Hermione was convinced he either cheated or was holding back his brilliance all this time.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron. "All of you-I'll send you an owl. Oh, and by all I meant 'everyone by Malfoy and his goons'." Which just left Harry, Hermione, and Neville.

"Like I would even want to," Draco shot back. "My bedrooms bigger than your whole house!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Draco, remember what we talking about how it's not nice to stalk your father's political rivals? And that reminds me: This might be a weird question, but do you have a House Elf named Dobby?"

Draco nodded. "Now who's stalking who?"

"Um, you are. You're stalking Ron. We just talked about this. But anyway, the reason I asked is because you remember how my scar told me that Quirrell was out to kill me?"

Draco nodded uncertainly.

"Well, it also told me that you have a House Elf named Dobby who will steal all of my mail this summer, so if you could order him to leave my mail alone, that'd be great."

Draco shrugged. "Why not?"

Once they got off the train and lined up to go through the gates in small groups, Tonks came up to him, hair bubble-gum pink. "So I got accepted into the Auror Academy," she said. "And this is my celebratory hairstyle."

"So you're going to keep it like that?" Harry asked, amused.

"Yep. I'm going to keep it like this every time I'm not disguising myself for as long as I'm over the moon about this. I would have told you earlier, of course, but I was too busy hiding from Percy."

"Hiding from Percy? Why? He's like, the least threatening person ever," Harry pointed out.

"I know, I know, but he wanted to hear me go over NEWTS for the third time and ask how I thought he did during OWLS by regaling me with the fascinating tale of every little answer he put or spell he cast," Tonks complained.

"Sounds like Hermione," Ron said bluntly.

"Hey!"

"So isn't there ANYTHING I can do to get you to let me call you Nympha-I mean, you're first name," Harry hastily amended as Tonks glared at him.

"Nope, sorry."

"Oh come on! I'll give you my firstborn!" Harry promised.

Tonks laughed. "Aren't you a little young to be thinking about that kind of thing?"

Harry shrugged. By all estimates, he should be a dad by now. If it was a boy they'd name him James Sirius and if it was a girl they'd go with Lily Luna.

"Keep in touch, won't you?" Harry asked her as she was about to head through the barrier.

"Oh, you couldn't get rid of me if you tried," she told him as she disappeared.

When Harry and Ron went through, followed by Hermione and Neville, Harry heard quite a bit of gossip surrounding Draco Malfoy and the question Harry threw on his parentage at the beginning of the year. He snorted; he'd completely forgotten about that.

"There he is, Mum, there he is, look!" Ginny exclaimed, jumping up and down, the minute she saw Harry.

"Hi, Ginny, right?" Harry smiled at her.

"Y-yes," she said, looking anywhere but at him.

"You're going to Hogwarts next year, right?"

She merely nodded.

"I'll see you there, then. Oh, and Mrs. Weasley, I wanted to thank you for your very thoughtful Christmas present."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear," she assured him.

"Well, I'd better go," Harry said. "I think my Uncle might still be mad at me..."

"Since September?" Mrs. Weasley asked, shocked.

"Well, he did send me death threats at Christmas," Harry told her.

"Oh my..."

--
When Harry arrived at home, he saw a large black dog lying on the Dursley's front lawn as if waiting for him. Harry quickly stashed his stuff in his room (he might have threatened to turn Uncle Vernon blue if he tried to lock his school things away but did promise not to use any magic) and ran out to meet him.

"Hey boy," he greeted. "You look like you could use a walk. I'm going to the park. Come with me?"

The dog just cocked its head like it didn't understand, but consented to follow Harry. Once he reached the park—which was thankfully deserted— he sat down on one of the swings and looked straight at the dog.

"Well, well, Sirius. It's been awhile."

Review Please!

Chapter Ten

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Wow, I got nearly twice the reviews for that chapter as I did for any other chapter. I think maybe this whole cliffhanger thing is a good idea, after all... And now, for the chapter that can't possibly live up to everyone's expectations.

Sirius froze.

"Come now, Padfoot, don't be like that. It'll be a pretty piss-poor reunion if one of us is pretending to be a stray dog the whole time," Harry told him, crossing his arms.

Sirius quickly resumed his human form. He looked better than Harry remembered, probably because he had escaped earlier and had three years of freedom under his belt before he came back in time. "Reunion?" he asked carefully. "What do you mean reunion? Harry Potter can't possibly remember me; I haven't seen him since he was an infant. Who are you?"

Harry smiled. "Harry Potter. But I think you've got your facts wrong. You haven't seen me since you tripped through the Veil of Death."

"I didn't trip through it!" Sirius protested indignantly. "Bellatrix hit me with a curse and while I admit that I probably should have been paying more attention, it could have happened to anyone and...Wait. How do you know-?"

"How do you?" Harry countered.

"I was there."

"So was I," Harry told him.

"You fell through the Veil, too? What, were you chasing me or something? I'd have thought that Moony would have had the sense to restrain you. He was standing right there. That's highly irresponsible, especially for him..." Sirius trailed off.

Harry snorted. "I hardly think you're one to lecture anyone else about responsibility, but, for the record, he did. No, I came through the Veil later."

"How much later?" Sirius asked.

Harry shrugged. "Eight years or so."

Sirius's eyes bulged out. "Eight years? That makes you, what? Twenty-three?"

Harry nodded. "Mentally, yes, although physically, of course, I'm closer to twelve."

"What happened? Did you defeat Voldemort? What did you come back? Did everyone die? Tell me everything," Sirius demanded.

"Well, um, Dumbledore got Snape to assist in his suicide at the end of sixth year but didn't bother telling anyone else about it so we all thought he was evil until right after he died at the end of what would have been my seventh year had Voldemort not taken over the Ministry half a month or so before school started. I spent most of the year on the camping trip from hell, a myriad of people died, including Remus, Tonks, and Fred, and I killed Voldemort after he killed me. Oh, and Remus and Tonks got married."

"...What was that last part?" Sirius asked.

"Remus and Tonks got married?" Harry repeated innocently.

"No, the other last part. The one about Voldemort killing you," Sirius clarified.

"Oh, well he killed me and I had a nice chat with Dumbledore's soul who informed me that just because I was imagining things it didn't make it not real and then I got better."

Sirius just stared at him.

"It gets better," Harry grinned. "Apparently I only survived because of the power of love."

Sirius groaned. "For the record, when you're telling this to other people, try to come up with an explanation that sounds more badass."

"Who says I'm telling other people?"

"But if you don't tell other people that you're from the future, how will they be prepared?" Sirius asked sensibly.

"What do they need to be prepared for? Things ended pretty decently last time, I married Ginny Weasley who was pregnant with my child at the time I left and Ron and Hermione got married. So, really, aside from Fred dying it was one big happy Weasley family. Molly was thrilled to bits, let me tell you."

"I can imagine," Sirius remarked wryly.

"Besides, if I can destroy the Horcruxes before Voldemort's rebirth then I just have to wait until he uses my blood to revive himself, let him kill me to get rid of the final Horcrux, come back and kill him."

"You make it sound so easy," Sirius muttered.

"I've got three years, I'll make it work. Are you up to helping me torch the Horcruxes?" Harry asked.

"Do you even have to ask?" Sirius asked. "Although I'm not quite sure how one goes about destroying Horcruxes except exposure to Dementors, Basilisk venom, and Fiendfyre."

"Exposure to Dementors? And how do you even know about Horcruxes anyway? They're supposed to be really obscure," Harry repeated, confused.

Sirius nodded. "Oh yes, Horcruxes are part of a wizard's soul and so a Dementor's Kiss can destroy it. And please, Harry, I'm a Black. Knowing about Horcruxes is just one of the many benefits of growing up in one of the darkest families in Britain."

"Guess so. Hey, do you know Fiendfyre?" Harry asked.

"I've never actually tried, but I've heard that with a little practice, any moderately powerful wizard can have some measure of control over it," Sirius told him.

"So can you start learning it? I would, except my wand is currently being monitored as I'm technically a minor and I want this out of the way as soon as possible. See if you can get it down by the end of the summer. And Sirius, whatever you do, you absolutely cannot tell anyone that I came back," Harry said seriously.

"Why not? Don't you trust your friends?" Sirius asked.

"It's not a question of trust, Sirius. It's just that if I start telling people then they'll be all like 'Harry, you're an adult and should really start acting like one. Besides, Snape is a hero, you really shouldn't be harassing him' and let me tell you, I had a lot of fun last year. I want to have fun this year and every year for the rest of my life. Once I tell people that I'm older than I appear, that fun goes out the window and I have to deal with responsibility," Harry wrinkled his nose at that. "Besides, then people will be pestering me about their futures and do you really think Remus and Tonks, Ginny and I, Ron and Hermione, or Bill and Fleur will get together if they know about it in the future? God know. Besides, Hannah is so shy now and Neville isn't anymore that if I told either of them about their future, I could destroy it. Nah, best to just let history continue naturally. Or, as naturally as I can, while still doing whatever I feel like," Harry amended.

Sirius snorted. "Now that's more like it. But while we're on the subject of doing whatever it is we feel like, how are we going to get me cleared? I'd rather it be sooner rather than later, personally, although I've had some fun this past year in Spain."

"Oh, so you did go to Majorca? And I think that once I get to the Weasley's, I can nab Wormtail and Voldemort's first Horcrux in one fell swoop. Can you wait two months or so until we go to Diagon Alley to shop?"

Sirius looked him straight in the eye. "I've waited fifteen years to clear my name. I think I can wait a little longer."

--

The next month and a half or so passed unbelievably slowly for Harry. He'd been getting mail, which was nice, but wanted to put off going to the Weasley's until after his birthday for two reasons. One, a quite meeting with Dobby. Two, it would be harder for him to meet with Sirius under Molly Weasley's watchful eye. It wasn't like he didn't like the woman, he did, it was just that she had a tendency to smother everyone with her love and he had long since outgrown the need for a mother.

He had been so bored that he actually took the time to follow through with his vague plan from the year before to try and mend his relationship with his blood relatives. And, surprisingly, it seemed to work. He had actually volunteered to help his Aunt Petunia around the house and shared with her some of Neville's gardening tips, which caused them to spend quite a bit more time together and made her grudgingly admit that he was earning his keep. She wouldn't admit to anything more, but he did notice a distinct improvement in her treatment of him. As for Dudley, that had been even easier. He just volunteered to play with him when his friends were busy and Dudley was far too thrilled to be able to play two-person computer games whenever he wanted to to risk upsetting Harry too much and forcing him to stick to one-person games. He highly doubted either of his relatives liked him any better, but at least he had to deal with less open hostility. His Uncle Vernon, no doubt still sore from the scene Harry made at the train station last year, just growled whenever Harry was in the room, as if he didn't trust himself to do anything else.

His friends were all also keeping him busy via letters. Harry was trying to convince Hermione that Lockhart was a fraud, Tonks to help break into Bellatrix's vault, Ron that being sorted into Slytherin wasn't an indication of evil, Ginny that he wasn't some sort of god, Neville that he should continue to show a backbone even though he was back with his relatives, Cedric to come play Quidditch with him once he was at the Weasley's (as they lived right by each other), Draco that knowing details about him that he had no business knowing

(allegedly via his scar) was not the same thing as stalking, Percy to voluntary leave his room more often than just mealtimes, and the twins to ‘teach’ Ginny to ride a broom. Due to his persistence and utter boredom, these goals were coming along nicely, although Ron still wanted proof, Hermione still wanted an autograph, and Tonks still wanted more details. Harry was sure that Ginny would regress after coming face to face with him again, but she was actually managing to converse normally with him through their letters, now. It was really a good thing that Hedwig appreciated the workout, Harry reflected, because she was almost never at the Dursley’s, which definitely helped ease relations on that front.

On the night of the Dursley’s Dinner Party, which also happened to be Harry’s birthday, but it’s not like they really cared, Harry was going to be quite busy. The first thing he needed to do was to make sure he was out of the house when Dobby decided to pop by. Sure enough, eight on the dot, Dobby popped in front of Harry. Fortunately, Harry was sitting on a park bench with Sirius in dog form lying at his feet.

“Ah, Dobby, I was wondering if you’d make an appearance,” Harry greeted him warmly. “Please, sit down. How’s Draco doing? You can only tell so much from letters.”

Dobby, who had been about to burst into tears at the fact that not only did Harry know his name, but he asked him to sit down like an equal when he realized what else the wizard had said. “D-Draco?”

“Yeah, you know, Draco Malfoy. The scion of the family you serve. How’s he been?”

“How is Harry Potter knowing of-” Dobby began.

“Magic scar,” Harry said simply.

“Ah, yes, Dobby has been hearing Master Draco complain very loudly about that,” Dobby admitted. “But Dobby did not believe it.”

“How else would I have known to ask Draco to order you to not steal my mail?” Harry asked rhetorically.

Dobby nodded; it was a good point.

"I don't think that you'd be required to punish yourself just for coming to see me, but either way, let me help you avoid any more self-inflicted injuries by informing you that I already know that Mr. Malfoy intends to give Ginny Weasley Tom Riddle's diary that will open the Chamber of Secrets and unleash a basilisk on Hogwarts. I can further promise you that I will always carry a mirror with me and that I won't do anything too stupid, but I will not promise not to go back to Hogwarts. If you use magic and disguise the signature as that of a wizard and so the Ministry sends a bloody owl no matter what the occupants of the house may be doing or who may be over, then they will start treating me like the Malfoys treat you and it won't stop me anyway as my friends will just come to break me out," Harry explained calmly. "Although I do appreciate the sentiment."

Suddenly, a faint pop was heard as someone Apparated into the woods surrounding the park.

"Well, I hate to cut this short, but it looks like my next appointment just arrived. Hm, she's early..." Harry muttered. "So unless you want more witnesses, I'd suggest you get going. It was nice meeting you!" Harry said cheerfully as Dobby cast him a rueful look and Apparated away.

"I hope you know what you're doing Harry," Tonks said as she waked up to him. "Because we could get in serious trouble for this."

"I know, but it's important. It's the only way to make sure that Voldemort actually dies. I mean, having him just floating around and possessing our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was bad enough. Imagine if he somehow managed to regain a body..."

Tonks shuddered. "Alright, but remember, you owe me." She grabbed Harry's hand to Apparate and noticed he was holding onto a dog. "What's with the dog?"

"He's my godfather," Harry explained.

"You're parents named a dog as your godfather?" Tonks asked skeptically.

"Well, my dad did at any rate. But then, you'll have to remember that my father and his friends are Fred and George's heroes."

"Bonkers, the whole lot of you..." Tonks muttered as she Apparated them to Diagon Alley. As it was dark, there weren't a lot of people out and about, although Harry suspected that the Leaky Cauldron was packed; it usually was anytime after five.

Tonks, Sirius, and Harry made their way to Gringotts. Once inside, Tonks transformed into Bellatrix Lestrange. The goblins didn't really care if she was supposed to be in Azkaban nor that she was a convicted murderer as the affairs of wizards never really interested them. When Tonks claimed she lost her key, the Goblins did a simple blood test which she passed, being a close relative of hers, and the Goblin on duty issued her a new key. As Bellatrix was in Azkaban and thus legally dead as was the head of the Black Family, Sirius, and Tonks was a relative of them both, she could have just laid claim to the vault herself, but Harry was afraid that that would make her a target and she hadn't even begun Auror training yet.

When they opened Bellatrix's vault door, Harry grabbed the Hufflepuff's cup and Tonks decided to liberate a bit of gold and some Black family heirlooms that had been part of Bellatrix's dowry but she was sure her mother would appreciate more than her reportedly headcase and imprisoned Aunt. Although how she was going to explain how she got them...Well, she could always blame it on Harry. He'd probably have a more convincing explanation anyway.

--

Immediately following leaving Gringotts, Harry had Tonks drop him and Sirius off at the Weasley's. Apparently Neville had stayed with them in June and Hermione had stayed for part of July, so it was just him. To his delight, Percy was downstairs playing chess with Ron when Harry got there. He was about an hour earlier than he said he'd be, but that really couldn't be helped, and what else was he supposed to do until it was ten? Ginny turned bright red when she saw him and

looked like she was wanted to bolt from the room, but refrained. There were improvements already. Now, to keep them coming...

--

Two weeks after arriving, it was time to go to Diagon Alley. Harry was incredibly anxious and hoped that he hadn't or wouldn't do anything to change events enough that Lucius pawned the diary off on someone else. He had to admit, he'd gotten rather used to knowing what was going to happen and he'd hate to lose it before he absolutely had to.

He'd had fun so far. He'd announced that Sirius was his new pet Padfoot and Sirius delighted in following the twins around and watching them prank people. He had made it a point to talk to Ginny whenever she happened to be in the room and even though it was an uphill struggle, she had slowly graduated from monosyllabic answers to short sentences. Harry might have accidentally suggested to the twins that Percy might be spending so much time by himself this summer as opposed to what he'd apparently done previous summers because he might have a girlfriend and the twins had jumped at the suggestion and kept insisting that Percy spend time with them, hoping he'd reveal something about his mystery girlfriend's identity. And if Harry didn't know better, he'd think Percy was enjoying driving the twins crazy with his cryptic answers on the subject.

Apparently the twins had taken his suggestion to teach Ginny as a challenge (as they had no idea that she'd ever been on a broom before) and had been pleasantly surprised to find out that she could outfly people twice her age (no one who played Quidditch, of course, but then, she was self-taught). Cedric had been over three times already and they had tons of fun playing three-on-three Quidditch (and Percy, of course, took the twin's distraction to retreat to his room to...study). Though he hadn't really known Cedric very well until they'd both been Hogwarts Champions, Harry found that he rather enjoyed the older boy's company and resolved to try and keep him alive this time.

--

Once at Diagon Alley, Harry convinced his friends to head to the Apothecary first so he could go and pick up his special-order Mandrake Restorative Draught. So maybe three dozen was a bit paranoid of him, but if there was one thing Hermione had taught him, it was that it never hurt to be prepared. Ron, Hermione, and Neville (who had arranged to go with the Weasley's when he'd stayed with them that summer) all looked at him strangely, but Harry's only comment was that his scar thought it was a good idea. He wondered briefly how long it would be before people thought he was crazy if he kept using that excuse to explain away his future knowledge.

Eventually, the Trio Plus Neville made their way to Flourish and Blotts. Harry tactfully suggested that the Weasley's only buy two book sets so that they could share them and Mrs. Weasley, though a bit embarrassed, seemed to think that it was a good idea.

Suddenly, Lockhart's photographer crashed into Ron. "Out of the way, there," he snarled. "This is for the Daily Prophet."

"Big deal," Ron muttered.

Lockhart looked up and saw Ron. Unfortunately, Harry was standing right next to him. He leapt to his feet and shouted, "It can't be Harry Potter?"

"Where?" Harry made a point of looking around, as if searching for himself.

"Aren't you Harry?" Gilderoy asked, confused.

"Nope," Harry said brightly.

"But...I...your scar..." Lockhart protested.

"Unfortunate cooking accident," Harry said shortly, repeating his story from the previous year.

"Then who are you?" Lockhart demanded.

“Draco Malfoy.”

“Oh, well, let me give you a free set of books to make up for this unfortunate mix-up,” Lockhart said, handing him a set of books. He then turned his attention back to his adoring fans.

“Here,” Harry said, dumping the books into Ginny’s cauldron. “Now you only need one set.”

“But what about your books Harry?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t intend to get them, Hermione.”

“But...then how will you learn anything?” she demanded.

Harry snorted. “Please, it’s not like I’m going to learn anything this year anyway. He’s a fraud, remember?”

Hermione nodded reluctantly. It had taken quite some time to disabuse her of the notion that the Master Obliviator was a genius.

“Harry, why did you tell him you were-” Mrs. Weasley began.

“IT WAS YOU!” Draco Malfoy’s voice rang out from behind him.

“Yes, Draco?” Harry asked politely.

“You started that rumor last year, didn’t you?” Draco demanded. “The one about me being Snape’s lovechild.”

“Technically, Fred and George started that rumor,” Harry pointed out. “But yeah, I did have a hand in it. To be fair, though, it’s not like we were friends at the time.”

“But you just brought it to people’s attention again. What’s your excuse this time?”

“I...” Harry shut his mouth abruptly. “I actually don’t have one. Sorry.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “And after I took the trouble of ordering Dobby to stay away from your mail, too...”

“Oh, please, that couldn’t have taken more than a couple minutes,” Harry shot back. “Although I do appreciate it.”

“So, how ever did you manage to survive a summer with the Muggles? I mean, I’d imagine that would be even worse than a summer with the Weasley’s,” Draco said.

“Well, my aunt and cousin seem to hate me less than usual this year, but my uncle looked like he wanted to strangle me every time he came near me,” Harry replied.

“Fun,” Draco said sarcastically. “Remind me why you think Muggles are worth caring about again?”

“Because my relatives treat me about the equivalent of how Pureblood fanatics treat Muggles?” Harry suggested. “Minus the attempted murder?”

“Ron, quick, your mother’s distracted by Lockhart, let’s make our escape,” Mr. Weasley said as he and the twins struggled over to them.

“Well, well, well – Arthur Weasley,” Lucius Malfoy drawled.

Harry rolled his eyes. Good God, this was a chance meeting in a crowded bookstore, not an epic showdown in the Old West.

“Lucius,” Arthur nodded, barely even pretending to be polite.

“Busy time at the Ministry, I hear. All those raids...I hope they’re paying you overtime?” He reached into Ginny’s cauldron and pulled out the brand-new copy of A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration (Harry had insisted on paying for their schoolbooks as they were putting him up for a month. Arthur and Molly had only agreed to this after he threatened to buy them all Nimbus 2001’s instead. Who knew the way to beat an aversion to charity was to offer more charity?). “I guess they are. It’s sad really how desperate you are for money that

you would lower yourself to be a disgrace to the name of a wizard for a few extra galleons?"

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy," Arthur said.

"Clearly," Lucius said, his eyes straying towards the Grangers. "The company-"

"Personally, my definition of a disgrace to the name of wizard is anyone over the age of fifteen who can't cast a simple expelliarmus without dropping their wand," Harry piped up.

"Or someone who can't ride a broom without falling off," Draco added.

"Or someone who doesn't like Quidditch," was Ron's contribution.

That definitely broke the tension and the Malfoys left without incident. Well, almost. Watching closely, Harry could see Lucius slipping the diary into Ginny's book. Too bad the fight had been averted, even if it was entirely Harry's doing, as he had been planning on betting Draco and the twins that Hagrid would win the fight between their fathers. Oh well.

When Harry and the Weasley's arrived back at the Burrow (after saying goodbye to the Grangers, who walked out into Muggle London, and Neville, who flooed home), everyone put their things in their room and Ron immediately challenged Harry to a game of chess. As Harry had accepted whenever Ron asked previously (following his theory that the more Ron beat Harry in chess the less of an inferiority complex he would have regarding him), he couldn't really think of an adequate reason to decline and go upstairs instead, and so was forced to play a match.

His heart really wasn't in it, though, and he played even worse than usual. The minute he lost, he practically flew up the stairs and into Ginny's room. He tore open her transfiguration book. Nothing. He looked through the rest of her school supplies. Nothing. He spent the rest of the afternoon searching through the whole house. Still nothing.

By nightfall, he was forced to come to one terrifying conclusion. The diary was gone. And so was Scabbers.

Note: Some of this may be a little rushed, but I didn't want the chapter to be too long (this is my longest chapter to date) and I also knew where I wanted to end the chapter, so it was this or a ridiculous amount of filler and splitting it into two chapters.

Review please!

Chapter Eleven

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

“Gone?” Sirius repeated hollowly later that night when Harry snuck out to meet him. “Gone? What do you mean he’s gone?”

Harry sighed. “I suppose it was too much to hope for that you had completely ignored my explicit instructions and taken them early.”

“Why would I have? You said you were going to take care of it,” Sirius pointed out. “I still can’t believe he’s gone. I mean, I was so close...so close...and now he’s gone.”

“Not he,” Harry corrected. “They. The Diary Horcrux is gone, too.”

Sirius groaned. “You know, I may have been rotting away in Azkaban at this point the last time you were a second year, but given that Wormtail was with the Weasley’s in Egypt, I can still be fairly certain that this didn’t happen.”

“You’re right,” Harry agreed. “The only question is, why did it happen? Why would Pettigrew have taken off with the diary?”

Sirius shot Harry a look. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it was when you announced that I was your pet Padfoot. Maybe even though Wormtail managed to not spook when I escaped Azkaban because I didn’t really show any inclination to make your life harder by showing a vested interest in getting into Hogwarts, he heard my name and decided that it was either the most incredible coincidence, or I was here and out to get him. As to why he took the diary...I don’t know. Maybe he recognized it from when Voldemort gave it to Lucius.”

Harry glared at Sirius, completely ignoring the last part of his statement. “Well maybe that wasn’t the best idea to call you that, but I don’t recall you coming up with any better suggestions.”

“Sure I did,” Sirius argued.

"What, Snuffles? Sorry Sirius, no pet of mine will ever go by such a cutesy name. Seriously, if you want me to come up with a more badass way to have survived Voldemort than the Power of Love, then you've got to come up with a more badass alias than 'Snuffles.' Seriously, that sounds like something Ginny would have picked out."

Sirius started laughing. "Really? She can't have been that bad."

"Wanna bet? We got a rabbit last year and guess what Ginny named it. Flopsy."

"W-what did you want to call it?" Sirius managed to ask between his laughter.

"Mega Ultra Flame Deathsman. Hey, that's a perfectly respectable name for a rabbit!" Harry insisted, crossing his arms as Sirius literally fell to the ground howling. "You know, if you're not going to take this seriously, I'm going back to bed."

After a few moments, Sirius composed himself. "But Harry, I'm ALWAYS Siri-"

"One serious pun and I'm going back to bed," Harry warned.

"Fine..." Sirius pouted. "So what are we going to do? We know that Pettigrew is off somewhere with the diary, but we don't know if he knows it's a Horcrux or not."

"Probably not. After all, if the likes of Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange, who, by all accounts, were two of Voldemort's favorites, never knew, I can't imagine why a spy would be told. No one ever trusts a spy. After all, if they can be a double agent, they can be a triple agent just as easily."

"Speaking of-" Sirius began.

Harry rolled his eyes. "YES, Sirius, I'm positive Snape really is on our side. You really should let this go. It's not healthy to carry a grudge for twenty years or so."

"Try telling that to him..." Sirius muttered.

"Well, to be fair, you did try to kill him when he was sixteen and that was probably very traumatic," Harry said diplomatically. "I mean, I know I was traumatized when Remus transformed that night at the Shrieking Shack, and he didn't even get a chance to try and kill me. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Don't mention it. After all, what are godfathers for?"

"And I do tell him this. On a regular basis. But to my credit, I think I've managed to annoy him so much that he's somewhat stopped seeing me as my father and now sees me as my own extremely irritating person," Harry said proudly. With a little effort, he'd managed in one year what he previously hadn't been able to accomplish in six.

"Way to go," Sirius said appreciatively.

"Getting back on topic, even though Wormtail won't know what the diary is, he'll probably end up writing in it at some point. When he does, he'll realize that this is the closest he's going to get to Voldemort's orders. He'll keep writing and probably get possessed. When he does..." Harry sighed heavily. "When he does, the Chamber of Secrets will probably be opened again."

--

Harry knew he had forgotten something. It was bugging him all morning; he just couldn't quite remember what it was. This was a rare instance in which Neville's Remembrall might have been useful, except that Harry already knew that he'd forgotten something and as the magical mood ring wouldn't tell him what, exactly, he'd forgotten, Harry knew he'd probably have just gotten frustrated and thrown it.

Of course, it wasn't realistic to expect Harry to remember everything. On the other hand, now the platform had sealed itself and he and Ron were trapped outside while everyone else was trapped inside and the train had just left. Last time, of course, they'd flown the Weasley's car to school. Of course, that was incredibly dangerous

and highly irresponsible and they should really wait for Ron's parents and...Oh, who was he kidding?

"I'll drive."

Climbing into the passenger seat, Ron looked at Harry skeptically. "Do you even know how to drive?"

"Of course," Harry said matter-of-factly. "Everyone who's lived in the Muggle world knows how to drive."

"So it's like the Muggle version of flying?" Ron asked as Harry took off.

"Um...kind of..." Harry lied. He did, in fact, know how to drive, having been bullied into getting a license by Hermione shortly after he defeated Voldemort. "They have a sport based on it at any rate."

"Like Quidditch?"

"A little. It's more about racing the cars and hoping they don't crash into each other or into the wall or spontaneously combust in the process," Harry explained.

"Muggles are strange," Ron commented.

"That they are, Ron. That they are," Harry said absently as he sped up, looking for the train. It was pretty simple, just following the tracks. After about ten minutes, they found had caught up to the Express. Harry started to slowly descend, aiming to land on the top of the train.

"Are you crazy? You can't land here!" Ron shouted.

"Why not?" Harry asked innocently.

"You'll get us both killed!"

"Oh, I will not. It'll be fine. See?" To prove his point, Harry slowly brought them down to the last compartment. The landing was a little bumpy, but then, the train was moving at roughly 60 miles an hour.

Ron looked green and stumbled out of the car and to the edge of the train. He then promptly vomited.

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Nice. How about you go first?" he suggested, helping Ron down into the compartment below them.

Once his friend was out of sight, Harry took out his wand, tapped the car, and whispered, "Portus." Harry watched the car vanish with some satisfaction. It had taken him awhile to get the hang of that spell. He then followed Ron into the compartment below them.

A stray spell immediately grazed his ear. "What the hell?" Harry asked, looking around. He groaned. Of course; they had picked the second-year Slytherins's compartment. "Can you guys just chill for a second?"

"Chill?" Draco repeated. "What does that mean?"

"Oh, um, never mind," Harry said, deciding it was best not to mention that that was Muggle slang. "Why are you guys attacking each other? I was only up there for two minutes!"

"We were minding our own business when suddenly a Gryffindor fell from the sky. We thought we were under attack," a blonde Slytherin girl Harry vaguely recognized as Daphne Greengrass told him innocently.

"It was nine on one; how can that possibly be considered self-defense?" Harry asked curiously.

"We thought it was a Weasley invasion and the rest of his siblings would follow him," a redhead Harry was fairly certain was Tracey Davis explained. Hm. He really should pay more attention to the students in his year.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm sure. Anyway, Ron, I got rid of the car so with any luck, you're parents will just think that they're going crazy and we didn't take the car."

"How did you get rid of the car?" Ron asked, confused. "I don't think we learned any spells to do that last year."

"Magic."

"Yeah, I kinda got that part. But how exactly did you-"

"Am I to understand that you flew a car from Kings Cross Station to here?" Draco interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

"Yep," Harry beamed.

"Is there any point in asking why?"

"Remember when I asked you to order Dobby not to steal my mail?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded.

"Well I forgot to ask you to have him not try to save my life," Harry explained.

"So you flew a car to the Hogwarts Express because my house elf wants to save your life?" Draco repeated incredulously.

"Basically."

"You're going to need to explain that," Draco said bluntly.

Harry sighed theatrically. "He's apparently gotten it into his head that Hogwarts is a walking death trap and therefore I'm better off with my Muggle relatives and in particular my Muggle uncle who could snap at any time and try and strangle me. Therefore, he sealed the portal to the platform and Ron and I got bored so we decided not to wait for everyone to fix the mess and just fly here."

Draco just stared at him. "That has got to be the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"And that is a fine example of the pot calling the kettle black. Seriously, though, you sound like Hermione..."

Draco just made a face at him. "Do you think he'll try to, *ahem* 'save your life' again?"

"Almost certainly."

"Right, this is bloody ridiculous. Dobby!" Draco called.

"Yes Master?" Dobby asked hesitantly when he appeared.

"I order you to stop trying to save Harry's life. It's very annoying. Just let him stay at Hogwarts. Got that?"

"Y-yes, Master Draco," Dobby said, his ears drooping.

"Great, now go."

With a pop, Dobby was gone.

"Thanks," Harry said, relieved. "I really owe you one."

Draco waved it aside. "Don't mention it. Just get the Weasel out of my compartment before we're forced to hex him again."

"Okay. Bye Draco, bye rest of the second year Slytherins I don't like as much as Draco," Harry waved cheerfully as he dragged Ron to the next compartment.

The next compartment they tried had Cedric and Cho Chang in it, flirting shamelessly. Then they came across the Weasley twins, Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, and Katie Bell examining the twins' pranking supplies. They encountered Oliver Wood and Percy playing Wizarding Chess (Oliver had made some comment about how it was nice that they won the Cup last year because that was the first time they had won since Charlie Weasley left. Percy had pointed out that Charlie had only graduated two years ago and Oliver threw a book at his head). In fact, it seemed like they had passed most of the Hogwarts population before they finally came across

Hermione and Neville, who were sitting in one of the first compartments with Ginny and Luna Lovegood.

"There you are!" Harry said exasperated. "We've been looking everywhere for you."

"I think that's my line," Hermione said, amused. "Neville and I looked up and down the train for you twice before we finally just grabbed this compartment."

"You were supposed to follow Mum and I through the portal but we didn't see you," Ginny pointed out.

"That's because the platform sealed itself and we flew Dad's car to the Hogwarts Express," Ron said bluntly.

"You did WHAT?!?!"

"I take it you don't approve?" Harry asked mildly.

"Of course I don't approve! You could have been spotted! Or killed! Or...or expelled!" Hermione finished, looking horrified.

"We've already been over this, Hermione," Harry said gently. "It'll take a lot more than that to expel someone. Especially me. Hell, my godfather didn't get expelled for trying to feed Professor Snape to a werewolf."

"Isn't your godfather Sirius Black?" Ron asked.

Harry had forgotten that he had mentioned that on Christmas to Ron, the twins, Percy, and Tonks. He supposed he was fortunate that Tonks had forgotten that when he mentioned that Sirius (in dog form) was his godfather. Well, either that or she thought he was joking. Otherwise he might have had problems.

"Oh, well, yes," he finally managed to say.

Hermione looked even more horrified. "Dear God, he tried to feed Professor Snape to a werewolf and was still allowed to attend Hogwarts? What was Dumbledore thinking?"

Harry shrugged. "Everyone short of Voldemort deserves 53 chances?"

"Why 53?" Neville asked.

"It's a nice, even number."

"No it's not," Neville said, confused.

"That's not the point. The point is: we totally flew Ron's dad's car halfway to school and then I used my incredible awesomeness to send it back."

"As long as you didn't tell anyone, I guess we can just pretend that it never happened then," Hermione said reluctantly. She paused. "Wait. You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

Ron and Harry looked at each other for a minute, then Ron quickly asked his sister about what she thought of the Hogwarts experience thus far and Harry introduced himself to Luna. Neville was thus left to try and calm Hermione down.

After all, they'd totally told everyone they happened to come across.

--

The Welcoming Feast was very nice, no less because he hadn't been expecting to get to attend it when he and Ron had initially taken the car. Harry cheered loudly when Ginny made it to Gryffindor and he also convinced Fred, George, Hermione, Neville, and Ron to cheer with him when Luna made it to Ravenclaw. That attracted some strange looks as no one ever cheered for anyone not in their House, but when had that ever stopped Harry?

Best of all, he was receiving some suspicious looks from the staff-no doubt they had heard the rumors of his and Ron having

commandeered Ron's parents' flying car-but as none of the Slytherins who saw them enter the train felt particularly inclined to tattle, there was really nothing they could do.

--

Harry was a bit tired from the all-night 'Harry and Ron flew a car halfway to Hogwarts and got away with it' party in the Common Room, but he was overall quite cheerful the next morning. Everyone had been there, even Percy (who Harry had to spend twenty minutes convincing that their little excursion was just an excuse to hold a party and if they had just ridden the train like everyone else, they would have been celebrating the Welcoming Feast).

Harry looked up from his breakfast in time to see the Weasley family owl, Errol, practically collapse in front of Ron. And what's more, it had a Howler in its beak. Ron turned pale and everyone in the Great Hall (who had looked up at the sight of Errol practically dying) looked torn between leaning closer to hear what Ron's parents were going to say about the incident or running from the room. Seriously, Howlers were annoying. Yes, it was plenty embarrassing for the person receiving them, but the parents should really keep their admonishments more private. Not to mention that everyone in the Great Hall didn't particularly care to hear a lecture every time any student screwed up.

Fortunately, Harry solved their dilemma for them. He casually opened the letter and it started screeching "RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY!"

Of course, that was as far as it got as Harry quickly tapped the Howler and whispered, "Muffliato."

The Howler was still going, but no one could hear it anymore. Well, no one but him. Still, small price to pay for the way everyone was looking at him in awe at how he had defeated a Howler. Oh, and he saved Ron the embarrassment of getting chewed out by his mother in front of everybody. That was nice, too.

And did he hear some murmurs already of the "Boy-Who-Silenced"?

Wizards sure did love their hyphens.

Review Please!

Chapter Twelve

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Sorry it took so long for me to update. Between making personalized Christmas Cards and studying for finals (not to mention actually taking them), I was kind of swamped. And I gotta say, 80 reviews...just...wow. You guys are great.

As Professor McGonagall handed out the schedules, she paused to inform Harry and Ron that Ron's parents had flooded over their trunks. Surprisingly, Harry had completely forgotten that he'd left the trunks in the car when he'd sent it back and so he hadn't even been worried. He probably would have noticed that they didn't have any belongings at the school except that the all-night party had ended just half an hour ago, so there really hadn't been time. That would explain how Mrs. Weasley knew that they'd taken the car, though. Ah well, the lack of supplies could have been really bad but catastrophe averted.

Hermione had wanted to head out to the greenhouses early, but Ron and Harry insisted on going back for their supplies. According to her, they shouldn't have been so irresponsible as to forget them, but, well, they were.

Once they finally reached the greenhouses, they saw the rest of the class already standing outside. And pointing and laughing at the panicked expression on Ron, Neville, and Hermione's faces as the four raced across the grounds. Harry, on the other hand, would have preferred being late as that almost certainly would have ended up meaning a loss of house points. Speaking of, maybe he should admit to hijacking the car after all, that should be good for at least a hundred points lost. Still, Harry wasn't quite sure if that would be worth the 'one more toe out of line' threat or giving up the notoriety of getting away with it.

Professor Sprout didn't even seem to notice their tardiness, however, as she was too busy trying to see just how much her body language could scream 'GO AWAY AND SHUT UP I DON'T CARE' to Gilderoy Lockhart before he'd take a hint. Unfortunately for her, Lockhart was

immune to such mundane things as whether or not his listener was seconds away from stabbing him with a spade.

“Greenhouse Three today chaps!” Professor Sprout managed to get out when Lockhart paused to take a breath. When Lockhart’s eyes swept over the class appraisingly, she made good her escape.

Harry, still looking to lose points, took his time and paid for that dearly. No sooner had he begun to lag behind than Lockhart spotted him.

“Harry!” Lockhart shouted, sounding far more enthusiastic than he had any right being. “I’ve been wanting a word – you don’t mind if he’s a couple minutes late, do you...Oh dear, I do believe she’s left already. Well, I’m sure she won’t mind at any rate.” He eyed Harry critically. “Harry, Harry, Harry. When I heard - well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself. Don’t know when I’ve been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts!”

“Um, actually Professor, the rumor is that I flew a car to the Express. And I’m not actually admitting to anything, mind you, so you don’t need to worry that people will think you’ve been a bad influence on me,” Harry reassured him, wondering vaguely why Lockhart felt the need to keep saying his name. It was kind of creepy. And rather irritating; he didn’t like his name that much.

Lockhart chuckled. “Of course, of course. It’ll be our little secret. Still, of course, I knew at once why you’d done it. Stood out a mile. Harry, Harry, Harry.”

Harry twitched. Seriously, if Lockhart didn’t quit this annoying habit of repeating his name over and over and sounding rather perverted, Harry couldn’t possibly be held responsible for his actions during the Cornish Pixie...lesson, he supposed was the word, but they really hadn’t learned anything except Hermione was smarter than their Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor and really, hadn’t they all already thought that? Well, the male students, at least. And the non-enamored females.

“Because I under the mistaken impression that you were Draco Malfoy, you didn’t get to make the front page with me and so you had

no choice but to fly a car to the Express in order to finally get that publicity I just know you've been craving," Lockhart beamed, clearly proud.

Harry just stared at Lockhart. Did he even read the paper? "But...I didn't make the front page. It wasn't even mentioned in the paper at all because no one has any proof that there's more truth in that than the persistent rumors that my Draco Malfoy is the lovechild of Narcissa Malfoy and Professor Snape."

Lockhart chuckled. "Ah, yes. I did hear about that. I didn't want to say anything, of course, but I've always suspected...in fact, I made sure to mention that fact in my autobiography. Now everyone can know the truth of such a touching love story. Why, it's a modern day Romeo and Juliet, isn't it?"

Harry had to fight to the urge to burst out laughing. Oh, Draco was going to kill him.

"I feel obligated to warn you not to let the fame go to your head. You're still young; you should take it easy, alright? You'll have plenty of time to figure out what you want to be famous for, how to go about accomplishing that, and how to manage your fame when you're older. Getting yourself expelled for pulling stunts like these, well, it will certainly earn you a little notoriety in the short-term, but it won't last and it will put a damper on any and all future plans," Lockhart told him seriously.

Harry was shocked. He had no idea that Lockhart had put this much thought into cultivating his fame, but he supposed it made sense. After all, he'd as good as admitted that the only aspect of magic he was particularly proficient in was memory charms so to have built up the reputation he had only on the strength of one spell...Well, that was damn impressive, Harry was forced to acknowledge.

"And you need to be even more careful because a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" Lockhart laughed. "I know, it's not quite as good as winning Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award five times in a row, as I have – but it's a start, Harry, it's a start."

Dear God...Harry had been so confused and affronted that Lockhart thought he was just attention-seeking that he hadn't even realized but...Lockhart was joking. He didn't actually think that a smiling competition was more fame-worthy than mysteriously vanishing Voldemort. Maybe he wasn't such an idiot after all. Granted, he was still practically a Squib, too self-centered to pay attention to what anyone else thought of him, and unscrupulous as hell, but definitely not an idiot.

"Professor," Harry began as Lockhart was about to walk away. "Your style of fame seems to be to be the popularity contest kind. I mean, yes, your books detail the adventures of you dealing with Yeti, Werewolves, Vampires, and several other assortments of magical creatures but...that all seems to be besides the point, isn't it? Your readers don't buy the books because they really care about all of that, they just like you and your heroic deeds are just an excuse for them to get to hear more about you and keep you in the public eye. You make sure that you're always in the back of people's minds by winning contests like the Witch Weekly one you told me about. It's quite a clever strategy and if you don't do something really stupid, it should be able to evolve with the times and keep you in the public eye for as long as you choose to be so."

Lockhart stared at Harry incredulously for a moment before he smirked. "Impressive. I take it that's not your style?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I don't need to worry about people forgetting me because that's just never going to happen, at least not in my lifetime. I disappeared from the magical world for ten years immediately following my ascension to 'hero' status and yet parents have been telling their children bedtime stories about me all this time, despite the fact that no one even knew anything about what happened that night at Godric's Hollow. I don't need to remind people that I exist and since everyone is so enamored with me already, I can just basically do whatever I feel like because unless I do something really stupid, the bad PR resulting from expelling me or anything of the sorts would just make it not worth it. Using this immunity, I can bolster my fame and popularity among my peers by such daring

escapades as last year's little Treasure Hunt and allegedly flying a car to the Hogwarts Express."

"That's a little callous, don't you think?" Lockhart asked, not bothered in the slightest.

Harry shrugged. "Perhaps. Don't get me wrong, I would do anything for my friends and I wouldn't just leave them to suffer the consequences that I can evade using my fame, but I have to be careful. If I don't carefully navigate things then what's to stop some gossip-mongering journalist or pissed off bureaucrat from doing irreparable harm to my reputation and making sure I'm not in a position to be able to help the people I need to? It's called being proactive."

"Well, you clearly know what you're doing so I wish you well. May both of our fames continue to grow in the years to come," Lockhart told him sincerely and continued on his way.

Harry shook his head to clear it. Having a serious discussion with Lockhart was not something that he had ever thought he'd do in either timeline. Ah, well. He was far certain that he was far more than just fashionably late, so maybe he would get some points taken off after all.

When Harry entered the greenhouse, Professor Sprout was just about to unpot a Mandrake. When she saw Harry slip in, she stopped and took her earmuffs off. "And where were you?"

"I was chatting with Professor Lockhart about how famous we both are," Harry deadpanned.

Professor Sprout narrowed her eyes. "I see. Ten points from Gryffindor for your tardiness, Mr. Potter. You can discuss your fame on your own time."

"Yes!" Harry cheered as he slid into a seat next to Neville.

"I wouldn't get too excited," Neville told him. "Hermione earned fifty while we were waiting for you."

Harry through his head back and wailed, “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! Curses, foiled again. How could you, Hermione? I thought we were supposed to be friends!”

Hermione just rolled her eyes. “You’ll get over it.”

“Face it mate,” Ron told him frankly. “Dumbledore likes you way too much to let you lose the House Cup.”

“Or hates me too much...” Harry muttered.

Ron ignored him. “Even if you and Snape do manage to end the year at a hundred points or so-”

“And the lowest House Point total ever was 116 and that was Gryffindor 1978,” Hermione interrupted.

Harry couldn’t help a quick smile from flitting across his face. That was the Marauder’s seventh year and clearly they’d gone out with a bang.

“Right,” Ron nodded. “Even if you managed that, Dumbledore would still end up giving Gryffindor 400 points for whatever really stupid thing you and anyone stupid enough to go along with you without any sort of explanation beyond your ‘scar said it was a good idea’ felt the need to do that will land you in the hospital wing for the entire last week of school.”

Harry hung his head, knowing they were right.

“Right, so if Mr. Potter has been brought up to speed, everyone put your earmuffs back on,” Professor Sprout ordered.

Harry just shook his head, unable to believe that she honestly thought they were actually on topic. Fortunately, he he’d done extensive research on Mandrakes over the summer in preparation for this year’s petrifications. He didn’t think he actually had anything to worry about until Halloween, though. After all, if an eleven year old could

resist Voldemort for two or three months – depending on when she'd started using the diary – Pettigrew certainly could.

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"Hi, Harry," Colin Creevey chirped excitedly. He looked nervous, but determined. "I'm Colin Creevey. I'm in Gryffindor, too."

"I know," Harry said quietly, remembering how pale Colin had looked in death, and how small. He had no business sneaking back into the castle to fight Voldemort, he was only sixteen. "I saw you get sorted."

"You did?" Now Colin was really red. "D'you think – would it be alright if – can I have a picture?" he asked, raising his camera hopefully.

"Alright," Harry agreed slowly. If it had been anyone else or if Colin hadn't given his life long before his time, Harry would have refused and used the opportunity to banter with Draco and Lockhart but...It was strange. He'd thought it was endearing when Ginny had come back to fight despite being too young but that's because he'd never thought she'd die. He'd never thought Colin would die, either.

"Hermione, would you?" he asked, taking the camera from Colin and handing it to Hermione, figuring she was most likely to know how to operate.

Standing next to Colin, Harry smiled as the flash went off.

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"I'm just saying it's weird," Ron said again as they headed towards Defense.

"And I'm just saying leave it," Harry retorted irritably.

"But you hate it when people get all crazy and star struck around you, so why would you-" Ron tried again.

Harry whirled around. "Because he reminds me of a friend of mine who died, okay? Now just drop it."

Ron paled, as he always did at the thought of death. Even at twelve, he was still so sheltered.

Harry took a deep breath and then headed to his seat.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books – well done," Lockhart was saying. "I thought we'd start today with a little quiz..."

As Lockhart continued to drone, Hermione turned to Harry and glared. "I still can't believe that you didn't buy the books. How can you possibly pass this class if you don't get the textbooks?"

Harry sighed dramatically. "First of all, they're not textbooks, they're storybooks. Secondly, I'm a celebrity. I come with a built-in BS ability. Third, Lockhart would never risk the wrath of his adoring public by flunking the Boy-Who-Lived-And-Or-Silenced and finally, it's all about the final exams anyway."

Hermione still didn't look happy, but Lockhart just placed a quiz down in front of her so she was forced to let it go.

"Let's see..." Harry muttered, staring at his own quiz.

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?

Famous (formerly, Hot Magenta).

2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?

To be able to take credit for every dangerous magical creature that's defeated anywhere in Europe.

3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

The building and management of his adoring fanbase.

And so on it went until finally Harry got to the last question:

54. When it is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, what would his ideal gift be?

The recent defeat of a dangerous magical creature in a mysterious manner with no witnesses.

He was pretty sure that his answers differed from what was in Lockhart's books – not that he had ever read them, of course, but still they were bound to contain fewer references to his Obliviating habit – but he still felt that they were appropriate and somewhat accurate.

Glancing through the tests, Harry could tell when Lockhart got to his because he just stopped and stared at it for a few minutes before shaking his head and moving past it without a word.

When Lockhart was done giving the class the answers (and Harry and Ron were consequently done playing Wizarding Chess, Neville was done watching them, and Hermione was done lecturing them about the importance of paying attention while simultaneously taking notes like the girl genius she was), he moved on to the next part of the lesson: Cornish pixies.

Harry tuned out Lockhart's attempt to convince the class that Cornish pixies were, in fact, highly dangerous creatures because he didn't think he could stop himself from saying something that would probably land him a detention. Normally, he wouldn't care, but there was no way in hell he was going to get stuck answering Lockhart's fan mail again.

"Right then," Lockhart declared grandly, throwing open the door to the pixie cage. "Let's see what you make of them!"

Harry watched impassively as the released pixies rushed around the room destroying everything.

"Peskipaksi Pesternomi!" Lockhart bellowed after waiting until the class was suitably impressed. In did absolutely nothing. Perhaps it was a joke spell? Like the one the twins had given Ron to change Scabber's color?

"Have you tried *immobilis*?" Harry suggested, pointing at one of the pixies and while the class turned to watch the pixie fall, he discretely pointed his wand at the other pixies and cast several silent freezing charms.

"H-how did you do that?" Seamus asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. "With my incredible awesomeness, we've been over this, God."

"Well done, Harry!" Lockhart beamed as he brushed himself off and got out from behind his desk. "Fifty points to Gryffindor."

Harry sat frozen in horror. "No matter what I do...there's no escaping it...just kill me now."

Note: I realize that Crayola didn't rename Hot Magenta 'Famous' until 2008, but it was just so perfect.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

That night at dinner, Harry found himself unable to eat. As a growing pre-teen boy, he found this to be quite worrisome. Fortunately, Harry also deduced that this was because of the nauseating celebration that was occurring at the Gryffindor table. Between Hermione's rapid-fire answers to Professor Sprout's Herbology questions and his own punishment for not taking Lockhart's quiz seriously, they had already netted 90 points. Combined with the rest of the House, Gryffindor was up 112 points from that morning. Only Snape looked as sick as Harry felt.

Deciding there was no reason to he had to partake in these festivities, he stormed off to the Ravenclaw table in protest and plopped down in front of a surprised Luna Lovegood.

"Hello, is anything the matter?" she asked curiously.

"It's only the first day of school and Gryffindor already has an eighty point lead in the House Cup and its all my fault," Harry moaned.

"I see. I've always thought that the desire to win that was indicative of the presence of Wrackspurt myself, but no one ever believes me," Luna confided.

"That's because Dumbledore's got them too well indoctrinated," Harry explained. "He's making them think it's about 'House Pride' and proving that your House is better than the others, which is really quite detrimental to the concepts of school unity, if you think about it..."

"Exactly," Luna beamed. "Thus, Wrackspurts. Why are you sitting here?"

"I had to get away from THAT," Harry gestured disgustedly over at the Celebration. Was that butterbeer he saw?

"But why here? I heard last year when the House Cup was awarded to Gryffindor at the last minute, you went over by the Slytherins."

"Well, I'm kind of avoiding Draco," Harry admitted. "Seeing as how he had Defense Against the Dark Arts this morning and no doubt saw that, once again, that rumor about his mother and Snape that I accidentally started just won't die. And besides, why not sit here? I like you."

"We only met yesterday," Luna pointed out.

"Ah, but what a meeting it was. I ordered that subscription of the Quibbler you recommended. I can't wait to hear about the things the Ministry is hiding from us so I can be properly outraged. But let's talk about you: Are the other Ravenclaws treating you okay?"

Luna nodded. "Oh yes. They seem to think that I'm under your protection or something because of last night and I expect that after tonight they'll think that even more. They haven't even laughed at any of my theories once. I'm thinking of coming up with progressively more outlandish ones to see how long before they crack."

"Now that is a noble goal," Harry laughed. "See, I knew there was a reason I liked you: we're both lone warriors in the fight against sheep mentality!"

"I like sheep," Luna told him.

"So do I, but when people like them so much they decide to think like them, they do all sorts of crazy things like declaring I'm the next Dark Lord," Harry countered.

"It must be the Wrackspurts," Luna suggested.

"Ah yes, the Wrackspurts wreaking havoc yet again and trying to blame it on the poor sheep," Harry shook his head sadly.

"And that's going in next week's Quibbler. Thanks, Harry."

--

"Harry! A word, if I may," Lockhart said, intercepting Harry on his way to breakfast the next morning.

Harry's friends looked concerned, but he just waved them off. He could handle himself. And if worse came to worse, he didn't want his friends to see him do some damage-control. What, with it not being 'ethical' and him being a 'second-year' and all.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked politely.

"I wanted to talk to you about your quiz yesterday," Lockhart continued. "It wasn't anything from my books, of course, but still it was all quite amusing. Some of your answers did make me wonder, however. What exactly do you know about-"

"Your habit of tracking down well-meaning but publicity-shy individuals who rid their local populace of whatever form of magical creature ails them and Obliviating them?" Harry finished.

Looking rather gobsmacked, Lockhart just nodded wordlessly.

"Well, it's certainly not very nice. Still, if they had wanted the credit, they would have publicized their exploits better before you had time to hear of it and track them down," Harry replied. "There's nothing I could do to change the fact that you stole those people's memories and their accomplishments and since Professor Dumbledore believes in unlimited second chances, he wouldn't do anything about it even if I told him. So, basically, as long as you don't try to Oblivate me or one of my friends, I don't really plan on doing anything. Oh, and if you try to steal one of my accomplishments, I will beat you to death with a paper napkin."

"CAN you beat someone to death with a paper napkin?" Lockhart asked, intrigued and not at all bothered by Harry's threat.

Harry shrugged. "I'll have fun trying."

--

"What's that funny clicking noise?" Fred asked in the middle of Quidditch practice that Saturday morning.

"Oh, that's just Colin, my personal photographer," Harry explained.

"Why do you need a personal photographer?" George asked, unsure if Harry was being serious or not.

"Well, I figure that since Colin is clearly going to keep following me around and taking pictures of me and since I'm really not that interesting—"

Fred snorted at that but Harry dutifully ignored him.

"I felt bad that he was wasting so much of his time, so I figured I might as well pay him. Besides, I set up a deal with the Daily Prophet and anytime they do a story featuring me, they'll just contact Colin and he can send them the appropriate photo." As the twins continued to stare at him, he elaborated, "I got the idea from Lockhart. Man's a media genius."

"I suppose he'd almost HAVE to be good at something..." George mused.

"And it's certainly not teaching," Fred contributed.

"What's going on?" Wood frowned as he flew by to see why his Seeker and Beaters had suddenly stopped practicing. "Is that first year spying on us?"

"Oh, no, that's just Harry's photographer," Fred said cheerfully. "So I guess that would probably put him in Gryffindor."

"Besides, the Slytherin team apparently couldn't find anybody to spy as they showed up in person. And full Quidditch gear," George remarked.

"Why in the world are they wearing their Quidditch robes to practice in?" Harry asked, confused. "That has got to be the stupidest thing I've seen all day."

"All day isn't very long, Harry," Fred pointed out as they went down to meet the rival team. "It can't be more than ten and we were listening to Oliver ramble about how he wants us to win the Cup again this year and next year." Seeing Harry tense up, he quickly clarified, "The QUIDDITCH Cup, Harry, the QUIDDITCH Cup. He couldn't care less about the House Cup."

"Oh, that's alright then," Harry said, calming down. "And yesterday afternoon Parvati and Lavender called me in to help them figure out who in our year is most 'skin-tone compatible' with them. I swear, one of these days I'm going to just buy Witch Weekly and force them to stop printing such inane articles that force poor innocent schoolchildren to undergo two hours of that sort of torture."

"You do that, Harry..."

"FLINT!" Wood yelled. "This is OUR practice time! We got up specifically! You can clear off now!"

"Plenty of room for all of us, Wood," Flint said innocently.

"But I booked the pitch!" Wood protested, his face turning a most interesting shade of purple that Harry was quite certain wasn't a good thing. "I booked it!"

"Ah," Flint said brightly. "I see why there might be some confusion then. You booked the pitch and I got a note signed by Professor Snape saying, 'I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch pitch, owing to the need to adjust to their new brooms.'"

"Wouldn't it have been easier to just book the pitch like a normal person?" Harry asked reasonably.

Flint flushed. "Well, I would have, except this week has been kind of hectic, with NEWT review and everything and so it just slipped my mind so I asked Professor Snape at the end of Potions yesterday."

"You've got new brooms?" Wood asked, distracted. "What kind?"

"Our Seeker, Draco Malfoy, was concerned that the team wasn't living up to its full potential and so his father bought the team Nimbus 2001s," Flint said proudly.

"Oh, that's good," Harry sighed, relieved.

Everyone looked at him like he was crazy. He didn't care, though, that had been happening quite frequently since he had come back.

"Good? Good? You think it's good that the Slytherin team now possesses seven of the fastest brooms out there?" Wood asked disbelievingly.

"Well, yes," Harry replied. "Otherwise it was going to be really awkward when Professor Dumbledore announced that I had bought the Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff teams seven Nimbus 2001s each."

More staring. Really, he might as well be talking to himself for how much input everyone else was giving him. And now Ron, Hermione, and Neville were coming over to see what the fuss was about. Would they have any more to say than his teammates? Doubtful.

"Why didn't you buy the Slytherin team any brooms?" Draco asked, suddenly offended. "I mean, you had no way of knowing that I was going to do it."

Oh yes he did. And that was why he'd bothered to go even the playing field, because he didn't want to listen to everyone complaining about favoritism when he knew they'd have all bought themselves top-of-the-line brooms if they could afford them.

"Well," Harry said, thinking quickly. "I didn't feel that last year's games against Cedric and Cho were much of a test of my ability because on my broom could outfly their brooms any day of the week. In order to have more of a challenge, I decided to get them faster brooms. Knowing that the rest of their team would give them a hard time about accepting a gift from a rival Seeker and there would be talk of them

throwing matches, I bought the rest of them brooms, too. And I couldn't possibly put Gryffindor at such a disadvantage by giving two-thirds of our competition state-of-the-art brooms and not giving ourselves anything, so I had to buy Gryffindor brooms as well. Since you already had a Nimbus 2000 from last year, it didn't even occur to me to get the rest of your team anything and so that was why it was really awkward when I realized sometime last week that my donation would seem like discrimination."

Hm. Not bad for an on-the-spot cover-up.

"But now our advantage is gone," Draco hissed at him.

"Think of it this way: if you hadn't bought the team brooms, you would get flattened in every match," Harry reassured him. "You saved Slytherin from a year of horribly humiliating slaughters."

Draco brightened considerably at this and Harry could only imagine how long he was going to use his newfound 'Savior of Quidditch' status.

"Since the Slytherins really do need to break in their new brooms and our teams' brooms are going to be presented at dinner tonight, I recommend that we just let them have the bloody pitch so I can go back to bed," Harry suggested.

"It's ten o'clock, Harry," Hermione said, raising her eyebrows.

"I know, but I only got two hours of sleep last night."

Now everyone turned to stare at Wood.

"What? I didn't wake them up until five," he defended.

"The twins, Lee, Alicia, Katie, Angelina, and I were having a poker tournament last night that didn't end until three," Harry explained. "In order to build team solidarity, you understand. We would have asked you to join us, Wood, but we expected it to run late and you had announced at dinner that you were going to bed early." He paused. "Probably because you knew that we had a ridiculously early practice

this morning and couldn't be bothered to tell us. Anyway, who here thinks going back to bed sounds like a great idea?"

Six hands flew in the air. "I rest my case," Harry told Wood, the only one with his hand still at his side. "Next time we have a practice before nine, please tell us. After all, while you have a point about the weather being unpredictable during games, we WILL actually know what time the game is at least a week in advance so I don't see why you can't just make an announcement the night before."

With that, he turned and started heading back to the castle.

"Hey, mate," Ron called as he, Hermione, and Neville hurried after him.

"Yeah?" Harry asked, not turning around.

"Why are you avoiding my sister?"

Harry froze. "Avoiding...Ginny? I'm not-"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yes you are. Every time she comes near you, you find some reason to immediately leave. Last week you even went over to sit with the Ravenclaws when she sat down across from you."

"I..." Harry trailed off. He hadn't realized that he'd been avoiding Ginny, but thinking back, he supposed that that was exactly what he was doing. Who could blame him, though? If he hadn't gone back, little James or Lily would be celebrating their first birthday soon. Now they might never exist. On the bright side, since the baby had not actually been born, assuming that he and Ginny got around to having children again, he wouldn't be able to miss their child as a person, just as a what-might-have-been and he wouldn't be subconsciously comparing his old child with his new one and hating himself all the while.

And then there was Ginny herself. She didn't have the diary this time around – thank God for that or he'd have to add that to the list of things he would never forgive himself for, beginning with abandoning Ginny and their unborn child to go through the Veil – so he wasn't

sure just how to break her off her hero-worshiping and get her to see him as a normal person. Particularly as he was apparently avoiding her. But it was more than just annoyance (he was dealing with Lockhart, after all, and the man's habit of mentioning how great he was approximately once every other sentence did grate on his nerves), it was...uncertainty. And guilt. He fell in love with the Ginny that had held off full possession by Voldemort's Horcrux for almost a year at the age of eleven, who had, despite their almost complete lack of contact, believed him without question when he insisted Voldemort was back at the age of thirteen, who had gone with him on his suicidal plan to save Sirius when she was fourteen, who had battled full-fledged Death Eaters when they invaded Hogwarts at fifteen, and who had co-led the Hogwarts resistance when it had fallen under Death Eater control and stayed for the Final Battle against all of Riddle's forces when she was sixteen. THAT was the girl he had fallen in love with. And while he would never want her to go through all of that again – he had, in fact, inadvertently already stopped the first – they all played a part in making Ginny who she was when he finally realized that she existed. While she was still the same person, he was worried that he'd end up trying to use this Ginny to replace the other Ginny that he lost and that wasn't fair to either of them.

So maybe he WAS avoiding her. But he had some damn good reasons.

Harry could see that Ron was still waiting for an answer and as he could never even hope to make the twelve-year-old understand, he found himself latching onto one of his reasons for staying away from her last time. Though, to be fair, she was a lot better at controlling her inner fangirl than she had been the first time. "I'm a little uncomfortable that your sister seems to see me as some sort of hero. I'm not, really. I'm just...a guy in some pretty extraordinary circumstances, that's all."

"You don't mind Colin following you around," Neville pointed out. "And he acts far more enthralled with you than Ginny."

"But Colin doesn't have a crush on me," Harry countered, crossing his arms.

"I'm not too sure about that..." Ron muttered.

"Be nice," Hermione admonished, swatting at Ron. "Personally, I think you're being very nice to Colin and I'm proud of you for that. Still, you're going to have to deal with a lot of girls having crushes on you, especially when we get older. Not only are you the Boy-Who-Lived, but you also attract a fair amount of attention through all of your various accomplishments and 'missions.'"

"I know, I know," Harry held up his hands in surrender, too tired to continue the argument. "But I don't have to deal with any of them on a regular basis and since Ginny is Ron's sister, I do have to deal with her. But..." he sighed. "I'll try to stop avoiding Ginny. Happy now?"

Three identical grins assured him that they were.

Review Please!

Chapter Fourteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter

The rest of September passed remarkably quickly for Harry who woke up every morning half-expecting to hear news of an attack in the night. Hopefully petrifaction, but you never knew. Just because the possessed Ginny never managed to kill anyone didn't mean that the possessed Wormtail wouldn't. As October progressed, it looked like the first attack could very well be on Halloween again. Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence that Mrs. Norris was petrified on Halloween the first time – it was thematic.

One day, about a week before Halloween, Harry was held up after breakfast by a rather concerned Percy Weasley. Not that he minded, of course; Hermione had been yelling at him ever since the Owl Post arrived for ordering notebook paper and actual pens. Apparently she expected him to humor the people who couldn't be bothered to use paper from a tree to write on when they could just use the skin of calves, sheep, or goats instead and who insisted on writing with bloody feathers. Seriously, between their office supplies and their classes, Harry was beginning to think that the entire Wizarding World just really hated animals.

Or maybe Hermione was mad that he intended to sell some of his stock to Muggleborns and Halfbloods who also preferred to live in the twentieth century and not the middle ages. He might have also mentioned something about starting up a Hogwarts chapter of PETA. But honestly, the girl was totally overreacting. He thought she'd be pleased he was getting involved in his community given her later activities with SPEW, but nooooooooooooo...And then there was that letter she got from her parents saying that half of her neighborhood was apparently planning on dressing up in official 'Harry Potter' costumes that he forgot to mention he authorized. Or maybe it was because he-

"Harry, have you seen this?" Percy demanded, holding up that day's issue of the Daily Prophet and effectively bringing an end to Harry's musings on why Hermione was upset with him.

"Nope," Harry said cheerfully. "I only read the Quibbler. I recently signed up to be their spokesperson, after all."

"I see," Percy said, rather taken aback. He quickly rallied, though. "There is an article in here about how you—"

"Donated brooms to three of the houses and the Malfoy's donated to the last house?" Harry asked.

Percy nodded.

"Made the front page?" Another nod. "About damn time. I insisted that it be on the front page, but I didn't think it would take this long. They must've actually had some real news to report for once. Tell me the truth: Did the story do me justice?" Harry asked, looking curiously at Percy.

"I...I guess so," Percy replied. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. They included the price of each broom and I did the math and you spent WAY too much money on this. I know your parents were wealthy, Harry, you only have to provide for yourself, and you'll have free lodging until you graduate, but it's still not a good idea to burn through all of your money by then."

"Relax, Percy," Harry told him patronizingly. "I've got that all taken care of."

"Befriend a leprechaun colony?"

Harry laughed. "No, sadly leprechaun gold dies after a few hours."

"Dies?" Percy arched an eyebrow at him.

"Well, the official story is 'missing,'" Harry admitted. "But we all know what that means. And like I said, I've got my finances taken care of. That Daily Prophet story? Quality photos of the Boy-Who-Lived apparently go for 50 galleons right now. Colin Creevey takes the pictures so he gets most of it, but I still get twenty percent. I get a percentage of the sales for the Quibbler and let me tell you, subscription has really taken off so it's a good thing I decided to get

involved when I did. Also, I've authorized Harry Potter action figures and plushies, trademarked my name, and am currently working on developing my own clothing line. It's nothing fancy, just robes with a lightning bolt on it, but it's receiving positive feedback so far. Not to MENTION how much I've been getting through autographed picture sales and fan club dues..."

Percy just stared at him.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked after a full five minutes of Percy just standing there.

"I-yes, I'm fine," Percy said finally, shaking his head. "May I ask why you're doing this?"

"So I have money to burn," Harry said simply. "Besides, if people are willing to buy anything that has my name attached to it, I might as well merchandize, right? Or at least that's what Professor Lockhart said."

"I'm starting to think that you spend way too much time with that man," Percy said bluntly.

"Maybe you're right," Harry said sadly, his shoulders hunched. "I just got so excited thinking of all the ways I could help people. I guess I'll have to tell Madame Pince that I won't be making that 5,000 galleon donation after all..."

"On the other hand," Percy said hastily. "As long as you frequently consult a seasoned professional like Professor Lockhart, I'm sure your money will be fine."

Harry smirked as he watched the older boy hurry away.

--

"This is bloody ridiculous," Harry complained as he followed Luna, Lockhart, Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Filch up to Lockhart's office.

Luna just smiled serenely, no doubt composing an article on the events in her head.

All Harry had wanted to do was enjoy the Halloween feast with his friends like a...well, not like a NORMAL person, it was a bit late for that, but like the other students. But no, he wasn't a normal person: he was on the Quidditch team. He had tracked mud all over the Great Hall when he was coming back from practice, got yelled at by Filch for making more work for him, vanished the mud, got yelled at by Filch again for showing off, and had gotten cornered by Nearly Headless Nick and invited to his Death's Day party.

Harry, who had had a miserable time at Nick's little ghost gathering, was about to decline when Luna came out of nowhere and asked if she could come, too. Nick had, of course, agreed and so Harry was morally obligated to go to prevent Luna from deciding that she'd rather be a ghost than a girl or something else that could get her killed.

Then, right when Harry had finally managed to convince Luna to at least head down to the feast for a little bit, she heard the Basilisk in the walls. Luna wasn't a Parselmouth, by any means, but apparently had bat-ears because she claimed that she heard hissing coming from the walls and insisted on checking it out. Unable to talk her out of it, Harry followed. And came across Mrs. Norris, petrified again, right before the other students passed by on their return to their common rooms. Consequentially, Filch had accused the two of them of killing his cat and they were on their way to defend themselves.

Harry was so busy oscillating between feeling sorry for himself and feeling annoyed that despite his best intentions, he was at the heart of the Chamber of Secrets investigation AGAIN that he didn't pay any attention to the proceedings until Dumbledore informed Filch that his cat wasn't dead.

"Not dead?" choked Filch. "But why's she all – all stiff and frozen."

"Because she's been Petrified," Harry explained before Dumbledore could.

"Is that a confession?" Filch demanded angrily.

"Of course not," Harry said, offended. "I just recognized the symptoms."

"And since when were you such an expert on Petrification?" Snape sneered.

"Since about halfway through the summer when my scar told me that the Chamber of Secrets would be opened by an unregistered rat Animagus who is believed to be dead who is being possessed by an evil diary and that in the Chamber of Secrets there is a Basilisk and looking at the Basilisk would petrify a bunch of students. And Mrs. Norris," Harry added as an afterthought.

"Basilisks don't petrify people," Snape corrected him gleefully. "They kill people. Everyone knows that. Your, *ahem* SCAR clearly hasn't put much thought into this."

"Au contraire, it's put quite a bit. While it agrees that staring directly into a basilisk's big, yellow eyes will kill you, Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection after Moaning Myrtle flooded the bathroom," Harry said, smiling brightly at him.

Snape pounced on that, of course. "How would you know what Basilisk eyes look like? No one has ever seen them and lived to tell the tale."

"I'm not quite sure how the fact that I'm alive implicates me in Mrs. Norris's attack, but I know because I asked Myrtle."

"And how would Myrtle know?" McGonagall asked before Snape could say something that everyone else would regret.

"She was killed when the Chamber of Secrets was opened fifty years ago," Luna spoke up for the first time. "We were interviewing all of the ghosts at Sir Nicholas's party and they were all so very eager to tell us how they died. I think it's a bit like old people and their grandchildren, really."

"You weren't at the Feast because you were attending a party for ghosts?" Snape asked incredulously. "They don't serve anything that hasn't been rotten for at least two weeks."

"That's why we stole some sandwiches from the kitchen," Harry replied.

Snape actually grinned. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for going to the kitchens, stealing Hogwarts food, and bothering the House Elves."

"He doesn't bother them," Luna disagreed. "They like him. In fact, they adopted him last week."

"Adopted?" Lockhart asked blankly, the other teachers sharing his confusion for once.

"Oh yes. They've decided that he's an honorary House Elf based on his stories of how his relatives treat him and I must say, I am very jealous." She paused, considering. "Well, about the becoming an honorary House Elf, not the getting treated like one by my only family in the world."

"I see," McGonagall said, trying to regain her equilibrium. "Miss Lovegood, since you went to the kitchens as well-"

"Oh, it was all my fault Professor," Harry said earnestly, hoping to keep her out of trouble with her housemates who she reported still thought she was odd but weren't harassing her this time around. "I talked her into it. I'm a horrible influence."

"I knew it!" Snape exclaimed. "That's ten more points from Gryffindor, Potter."

"Severus!" McGonagall protested. "That's hardly-"

"Oh, it's very fair Professor," Harry defended his sole ally among the staff. Well, in his point-losing crusade, anyway. "I really should know better. Luna's only a first year."

"And you're only a second," McGonagall pointed out.

"There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Potter," Luna assured him. "All influence is immoral because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul."

"The Picture of Dorian Gray!" Harry exclaimed delightedly. "This is why you're my fourth closest friend. I quote things all the time, but no one ever recognizes it except Hermione and she always chides me for being 'childish.'"

"Wrackspurts," Luna diagnosed.

"They're a pandemic," Harry agreed.

"POTTER!" Snape shouted. When Harry finally deigned to look at him, he continued, "Enough about your mythological creatures and your obscure Muggle literature! Tell me why you weren't at the Feast."

Harry stared at Snape. "We already did, Professor. We went to Nick's Death Day Party. We have a ton of witnesses. Of course, they're all dead, but you would be a living-ist, would you?"

Despite the fact that Snape almost certainly knew it was a bad idea, he had to ask, "Living-ist?"

"Someone who judges someone based on whether they are alive or dead," Luna answered promptly.

"The Quibbler has been trying to bring people's attentions to these little-known prejudices, but clearly you don't subscribe," Harry elaborated.

Snape's lip curled. "Indeed. And why didn't you go to the Feast after the party?"

"Oh, the party's still going on. We were actually headed to the Feast when we happened across Mrs. Norris," Harry said.

"And why didn't you come down until after the Feast ended?" Snape thought he had them there, but the pair actually had a very simple reason for that and it didn't even involve any illicit activities.

"There were a lot of ghosts," Luna explained. "Sir Nicholas invited one for every year he'd been dead and we wanted to interview all of them."

"If you were on your way to join the Feast, then why were you in that upstairs corridor?" Snape asked logically.

"Why were the students returning from the Feast up there if that corridor is nowhere near the Great Hall?" Harry shot back.

"We were up there because I heard the walls hissing and I wanted to investigate," Luna said tranquilly.

Harry groaned. He'd actually understood what the Basilisk was saying, but wasn't planning on bringing the fact that they had heard ANYTHING up. As Ron had pointed out after the original accusation, it was better to keep the fact that he could hear the Basilisk quiet. Although come to think of it, Ron was actually talking about Harry hearing voices and probably thought he was crazy. Ah well, it was the thought that counted.

Dumbledore looked startled. "You're a Parselmouth, Ms. Lovegood?"

"Oh no," Luna shook her head. "I didn't understand what the wall was saying, I just heard hissing."

"That totally lends credence to my scar's Basilisk theory, just so you know," Harry couldn't resist adding.

"Doesn't anyone care about my cat?" complained Filch.

Biting his tongue to refrain from answering in the negative, Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a vial of Mandrake Potion and held it out for Filch to take.

"What's this?" he asked suspiciously as he took the vial. "Some kind of poison?"

"No, no," Harry assured him. "I wouldn't do that. Not in front of all these witnesses, at any rate." Somehow, that did not seem to calm Filch. Strange. "It's Mandrake Potion. It can revive Mrs. Norris."

"And you just happen to be carrying this around with you?" Snape demanded. "Headmaster, clearly Potter knows more than he's letting on."

"Of course I don't just happen to carry some around. But I have had three vials on me since the moment I stepped foot in Hogwarts this year. And I confessed that I knew that at some point a Basilisk was going to be set loose on the school and you think I'm hiding something? Really?" Harry asked.

"Harry makes some good points," Lockhart was quick to side with his marketing prodigy. "And since he's clearly not responsible for this, no permanent harm was done, and Mrs. Norris will be immediately revived, why don't we let these two get back to their Common Rooms?"

"An excellent idea—" Dumbledore began.

"HE KNOWS I'M A SQUIIB!" Filch burst out, interrupting the Headmaster.

Everyone looked at Harry.

"Well, okay, that one's true, but considering that I already mentioned that I'm against discriminating against people who happen to be dead, it's highly unlikely that I have a problem with people who happen to not have magic," Harry said reasonably.

"That's an admirable attitude," Dumbledore said, pleased once again by Harry's blatant refusal to accept the ingrained prejudices of Wizarding Society. "Very well, off to bed, you two."

"Do you want to just get dinner in the kitchens since the feast is over?" Harry asked as he and Luna left Lockhart's office.

"That sounds like a good plan," Luna agreed. "And I want to see the House Elves working on those chocolate pumpkins. Why are you having actual pumpkin-sized chocolate replicas delivered to everyone in the castle in the middle of the night tonight?"

"Because this summer when I was talking about the Great Pumpkin, Cedric told me that he didn't believe in it and we made a bet about whether or not I would be able to prove its existence to him," Harry explained.

"That sounds an awful lot like fraud, Harry," Luna told him.

"It's not fraud, we're just the Great Pumpkins helpers," Harry contradicted. "Just like Santa has the elves."

"And now the Great Pumpkin has the House Elves," Luna mused.

"And me, the Honorary Elf," Harry said smugly.

Luna glared playfully at him. "Isn't the Great Pumpkin from Peanuts?"

"Do you honestly think Cedric has ever heard of Charlie Brown?"

"I suppose not," Luna conceded. "A good thing, too, because I heard that the only way to really summon the Great Pumpkin is through a satanic ritual."

Harry stopped and looked at her. "Luna," he said slowly. "What have I told you about fact-checking?"

"Never ever do it unless your godfather has been thrown into Azkaban without a trial?" Luna guessed.

"Exactly."

--

After Harry walked Luna to her Common Room – and thanked God once again that he wasn't a Ravenclaw as he never could figure out the riddle and that would make him the third-year Neville of Ravenclaw – he headed immediately for the Owlery. He knew he shouldn't risk getting caught out tonight of all nights and he hadn't thought to take his invisibility cloak with him to the party (a mistake, to be sure), but this was important. He had to talk to Sirius now that Pettigrew was on the move and he needed to do it soon.

He quickly scrawled out, 'We need to talk. PP has made his appearance. Name the time and place.'

"Hedwig," he whispered and after a moment, his large snowy owl flew to him. "Give this to Sirius, okay? Make sure he's alone and don't leave without a response."

As Harry watched Hedwig fly off, he realized that things were about to get complicated. Oh joy.

Review Please!

Chapter Fifteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: There was some confusion about the "that would make him the third-year Neville of Ravenclaw" line. What I meant is that in third year, Neville lost password-knowing privileges when McGonagall decided it was somehow his fault that his list of passwords that he kept in his dorm room right by his bed ended up in the hands of a fugitive. He had to stand around and wait for someone to take pity on him and let him in the Common Room much like a Ravenclaw Harry would have to stand around not being able to figure out any of the riddles to get into Ravenclaw and be stranded outside until someone else came along.

Also a problem with: "I suggest we use 'Sectumsempra'" from way back in chapter...five, I think? That is, in fact, the spell I wanted them to use. The twins may not know the spell as it is not on the curriculum and was invented by Snape personally, but since Harry can pull it off in book six without knowing what it is, I don't see why Fred and George couldn't. Granted, at third year they might not be powerful enough for the spell to be very effective, but spells are never effective against trolls.

Just wanted to clear that up and since the people confused were anonymous reviewers...

The following morning, everyone was pleased but mystified as to why giant chocolate pumpkins with a cursory note from the Great Pumpkin wishing them a Happy Halloween. As Harry went down to breakfast, Cedric called out to him.

"I still don't believe you," the older boy said matter-of-factly. "Both about the Great Pumpkin and about the lengths you'd go to to convince me."

"You just don't want to pay up," Harry argued. "And how else do you explain that delightful and thoughtful Halloween gift?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Cedric said. "But you're probably behind it. I don't know how you did it, but it was definitely you."

"God, you're starting to sound like Snape..." Harry muttered. "And what makes you think that I'm worthy to be the Great Pumpkin's assistant anyway?"

"I don't think you're worthy to be the Great Pumpkin's assistant because the Great Pumpkin is not real," Cedric said slowly.

Harry looked pained. "See if the Great Pumpkin comes to visit you next year. I bet next you'll say that you don't believe in Santa Claus."

Cedric's brow furrowed. "But I DON'T-"

"Silence!" Harry held up his hand. "I will not hear your lies. Good day." With that he walked over to the Gryffindor table and, after a moment's debate, sat down across from Ginny. He did promise he'd try, after all; he just wished she'd hurry up and get over him so he could pursue her. As convoluted as that sounded.

"Hey Ginny," Harry greeted her. "Like your pumpkin?"

Ginny, who had begun to blush the minute he sat down, brightened. "Uh-huh. I'm not entirely sure that I believe in this 'Great Pumpkin', but if he's willing to give me massive amounts of chocolate, I guess I can play along."

"That's the spirit," Harry beamed. "But don't ask Luna about it."

Ginny cocked her head at him curiously and Harry remembered that since the two lived so close together they were already more-or-less friends. "Why not?"

"If the teachers heard some of her theories on the Great Pumpkin, they might ban any visits in future years," Harry confided.

"Ah," Ginny said, as if that explained everything. When it came to Luna, it usually did.

"I can't find it!" Hermione complained as she slid in next to Ginny. Ron and Neville each took a place on one side of Harry.

"Can't find what?" Harry asked, genuinely confused.

"Both copies of Hogwarts: A History have been checked out!"

"I see. May I ask why in the world that book is so popular when I know for a fact that the last person before you to check it out was my mother?" Harry asked.

"Everyone wants information about the Chamber of Secrets," Neville told him. "The pumpkins were a nice distraction to stop everyone from panicking, but there was still a mad library rush this morning."

"And Hermione made us come along with her to look for a copy. When she found out that both copies were gone, she made us look around the library like she thought Madame Pince was lying to her and was secretly stashing extra copies under the tables and in the Restricted Section. Boy was searching there without Madame Pince noticing fun," Ron added, shuddering.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Harry asked, a little annoyed that he missed an excellent opportunity to cause chaos.

"We tried," Neville assured him. "You started hexing us."

"I don't remember this," Harry said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"That's because you were still asleep," Ron said.

"Oh honestly," Hermione scoffed. "It's not like he sleeps with his wand under his pillow."

Ginny giggled at the look on Harry's face.

"Well, actually, I kind of do," he corrected her. "Sorry I sleep-hexed you guys, but I'm glad I wasn't too sleep-annoyed or else you would probably still be in the Hospital Wing."

"Yeah, that's great Harry," Hermione said distractedly and with absolutely no sympathy for the suddenly wary-looking Ron and Neville. "But in the meantime, how am I supposed to learn about what happened to Mrs. Norris and the Chamber of Secrets?"

Harry snapped his fingers. "Oh, that's right, I almost forgot." Harry stood up on top of his seat and cast a quick "Sonorous."

"Attention everyone," he boomed. The students all looked at him in interest and several teachers looked mildly annoyed. No one tried to stop him, though, which was always good. Dumbledore wasn't in the Great Hall to try and censor him for the students 'own good' which was better.

"It has come to my attention that no one except my best none-Quartet friend," Harry did his best to stop from flinching at the word 'Quartet' which he still had a strange aversion to, "Luna Lovegood and I know what actually happened last night. This isn't because I'm famous and she's awesome, although we certainly are that. It's because we're reporters and reporters always know everything before anyone else does. After all, if we didn't, we'd be kind of unemployed. But anyway! Last night a supposedly dead parent-betrayer illegal rat animagus whose name my scar is not clear on but is fairly certain rhymes with 'Peter Pettigrew' broke into the castle – in illegal rat animagus form – and opened the Chamber of Secrets."

"Why would he do that?" Percy asked, skeptical.

"Because he was possessed by an evil diary that used to belong to Tom Riddle. That's right, you heard me: Lord Bloody I'm-So-Scary-No-One-Can-Bear-To-Say-My-Name Voldemort," Harry paused to wait for the gasps to die down, "kept a diary. Granted, he enchanted it to cause anyone else who writes in it to open up the Chamber of Secrets and attack people, but it's still a diary. And for that matter who writes in another person's diary? That's just kind of bizarre and definitely in bad taste..."

"Are you saying you know what's in the Chamber of Secrets?" Justin Finch-Fletchley (who Harry was slightly peeved at for shunning him

when Harry was over at the Hufflepuff table to talk to Cedric) asked, fear obvious in his voice.

“Yes,” Harry said simply.

“Is that because you’re responsible for-” Ernie MacMillan began.

Harry, in the interest of quelling the soon-to-be-rampant (especially after what he had planned for the Dueling Club) rumors about him being the Heir of Slytherin and not letting the rather pompous Ernie steal his precious spotlight, quickly cut him off. “No, no it is not. Trust me: if I were responsible for this I wouldn’t be hiding my ability and I certainly wouldn’t be petrifying people for free. Instead, I would market it.”

It was almost sad how convinced everyone looked at that. They wouldn’t necessarily believe he would never petrify anybody, but they would believe he was that obsessed with money. He wasn’t, really, it was all just a game. A test to see just how far he could use his fame before there was a backlash. “There is a basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. You can get the full story about the Chamber in Hogwarts: A History, but unfortunately there is apparently a huge waiting list for the school’s TWO those of you who don’t know, a basilisk is a giant snake – the one in our school is approximately sixty feet long – that has very poisonous fangs and will kill you if you make eye contact. If you look at its reflection, you will only be petrified. Fortunately, I have a supply of mirrors, books, and Mandrake Potion – which will unpetrify you – on hand. The Mandrake Potion is free but the mirrors are ten sickles each and the books are five galleons. For an extra five sickles, I can sign your book. That will be available after breakfast.”

“And how do you know all of this?” Justin repeated.

“My scar told me,” Harry said. “That’s all you really need to know.”

“I don’t think scars work like that,” Penelope Clearwater said, frowning.

“Who’s the one with a one-of-a-kind killing curse scar, you or me?” Harry asked her rhetorically. When she didn’t answer, he continued.

"I think that makes ME the expert. Now, Filch's cat has already been unpetrified and while that may annoy some of you, know that this is also proof that the Mandrake Potion is both effective and quick, so even though the fact that the Basilisk is moving through the pipes means it can appear anywhere at anytime, as long as you always use a mirror to look around a corner, you should be fine. Now, who wants to buy something?"

Harry was immediately mobbed.

--

"Harry, are you sure this is entirely ethical?" Hermione asked him later that day as they were heading over to look at the place where Mrs. Norris was petrified. Apparently someone had turned the blood-red lettering of Riddle's message neon-pink. "Using people's panic to make a profit and withholding potentially life-saving tools in times of crisis?"

"Relax, Hermione," Harry told her. "No one really needs Hogwarts: A History and now that so many people are buying it, the waiting list in the library should be much more reasonable for those that can't afford it. The mirror is essential but lots of people possess hand-held mirrors and just bought one from me because they are trademark Harry Potter Mirrors and for those that don't have a mirror and need one, I consulted some of the less well-off students and ten sickles is a very reasonable price. As for profiting off of everyone's panic, well...guilty as charged. But you heard Neville! I also stopped people from panicking with my pumpkins."

"That was you?" Ron asked, wide-eyed.

"Of course it was," Hermione said rolling her eyes. "What did you think; there actually was a Great Pumpkin out there you've never heard of until today?"

"Maybe?"

"Hey, isn't this where all the water came from last night?" Harry asked.
"Let's go see where it came from."

“Alright,” Hermione agreed and headed in.

Ron didn’t move. “I can’t go in there!”

“Why not?” Neville asked.

“That’s a girl’s bathroom!” Ron said gruffly.

“Oh grow up,” Harry advised. “In a couple more years you’ll be begging for a reason to come in here. Besides, there are just stalls in girl’s bathrooms so it’s not like you’d even see anything anyway.”

Looking incredibly reluctant, Ron allowed Neville and Harry to pull him into the bathroom, where, to their surprise, they found Luna trying to talk Hermione into getting a subscription to the Quibbler. She didn’t appear to be making much progress.

“I wouldn’t bother with her just yet, Luna,” Harry told her. “She’s just not ready.”

Immediately, Luna’s expression became much more somber. “I am so sorry,” she said sincerely.

“What do you mean you’re sorry? For what? And what am I not ready for?” Hermione demanded, looking a bit affronted.

“You’re not ready for the Quibbler,” Harry said.

Hermione, who looked as if she were of the opinion that it was the Quibbler that was not ready for her, narrowed her eyes. “Why not?”

“Because you didn’t even consider the possibility that the Great Pumpkin is real,” Luna said matter-of-factly.

Hermione did a double take. “How do you even know that?”

“You were debating its existence with Neville when you were in the library this morning,” Luna explained.

"What were you doing in the library?" Hermione asked, uncertain she wanted to know.

"Checking out two copies of Hogwarts: A History," Luna replied brightly.

Harry laughed. "I love you Luna, I really do."

Hermione could only gape wordlessly and with not a little outrage at the blonde Ravenclaw. She had spent three hours looking for a copy, after all.

Seeing this, Neville quickly stepped in. "So, why does that disqualify Hermione from being Quibbler material."

Luna gave him an amused look. "If you can't even entertain that notion, then you will NOT be able to handle some of our more interesting news."

"What are you even doing here, Luna?" Harry asked conversationally.

"I was doing a follow-up interview with Myrtle here," Luna said, gesturing towards the ghost who had until that point been hiding in one of the toilets. "Seeing as how she left so abruptly last night after Peeves started teasing her."

"You really shouldn't let him get to you like that," Harry added. "He's just bitter that the ghosts won't accept him because he's not technically dead and he has no purpose but to cause as much havoc as possible. Now, while Fred, George, and I may think that that is a noble mission, I'm sure being completely isolated at all times since the beginning of your existence must get a little frustrating at times and so he took it out on you. He can't really do anything about the isolation, either, because just imagine what would happen if there were to be two Poltergeists at Hogwarts."

Everyone took a moment to contemplate that and quickly realized that Harry was right and that must never, ever be allowed to happen.

"I know," Myrtle admitted. "But sometimes he just gets to be too much! I mean, I was killed right at the height of puberty so not only am I eternally bespectacled and acne-ridden, but I'm hormonal as hell and liable to cry at the drop of a hat."

"I am so sorry," Harry told her honestly.

"Not to mention I was on my period at the time..."

Harry could only wince. He'd had plenty of second-hand experience with PMS. "Wow. That...that sucks. I'm sorry."

Myrtle nodded. "Thank you. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'm about to cry for no reason I can think of so I'd like to be alone now."

"Bye," Luna said waving. "Thanks for the interview."

"RON!" Percy Weasley shouted the minute they emerged from the bathroom. "That's a girl's bathroom! What were you-?"

"Ron's considering a sex change," Harry said seriously. "He's still undecided, so we're showing him all the differences there will be if he ever goes through with it and going to the girls' bathroom instead of the boys' will definitely be one of them."

Percy opened and closed his mouth a few times but no sound came out.

"You prat," Ron swatted at Harry. "I am not."

"Thank God," Percy said, relieved. "I don't even want to think about how I would explain how you became 'Ronnie' to Mother. But as a prefect, I'm still obligated to ask what you were doing in there."

"We-" Harry began but Ron shot him a glare.

"I'll handle this, if you don't mind," Ron took a deep breath. "We went to go stare at the pink writing and then Harry decided to go investigate why the girls' bathroom flooded and when I said that I couldn't go in there he assured me that once puberty hit I'd be singing

a different tune and when we got in there, Harry's friend Luna was interviewing Moaning Myrtle, Myrtle got depressed, and we left."

Percy blinked. "No, really, why were you in there?"

"That's what happened," Ron insisted.

"I swear I must be getting old," Percy muttered. "Do you have any idea how this looks? Coming back here when everyone else is down at dinner..."

"So nobody will see us up here," Harry shrugged. "Besides, everyone's been coming up to stare at the wall all day. There's really not much to do around here. Hogwarts is surprisingly dull as far as magical schools go."

"It is not!" Hermione and Percy exclaimed, scandalized, simultaneously.

"You know, at Durmstrang the Forbidden Forest isn't a detention waiting to happen: it's a rite of passage. And one third of Beauxbatons students aren't fully human. Imagine how exciting those schools must be on a day to day basis," Harry said dreamily.

"We have a Basilisk; that's exciting," Ron said defensively.

"Not really; it's only attacked a cat. At Hogwarts we need Voldemort himself to come and liven things up despite the fact that he's dead," Harry replied.

"Oh honestly, Ron, it's just a name," Hermione said exasperated as the boy had flinched upon hearing Riddle's alias. This time, Harry had taken great pains to ensure that Hermione never succumbed to ridiculous wizarding practices of refusing to actually refer to Voldemort as anything but 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' or 'You-Know-Who.' After all, if they called him 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' then they were, in fact, naming him and what if people DIDN'T know who?

"How can You-Know-Who be causing problems if he's dead?" Percy asked, frowning. "Is he a ghost?"

"No, he's just mostly dead," Harry explained.

"Mostly dead?" Neville repeated. "What's the difference?"

"There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Now, mostly dead is slightly alive. Now, all dead...well, with all dead, there's usually only one thing that you can do," Luna said, grinning.

"Go through his clothes and look for loose change," Harry finished. "I love Princess Bride! You know," he said, turning to his three best friends. "I don't know what it is, but lately Luna's been beating you guys in the friends department hands down."

"It's not our fault we're not insane," Hermione said, crossing her arms. "No offense, Luna."

"Why would I be offended?" Luna asked. "I've seen your version of sanity. It bores me."

"Hey, why were you up here?" Neville asked. "Isn't that as suspicious as us being up here, even if you are a Prefect? In fact, I'd say its even more suspicious as you're old enough to conceivably know how to petrify someone and we aren't."

"I—" Percy began, turning very red.

"Oh, he was probably just off making out with Penelope Clearwater, his girlfriend," Harry guessed.

"Just...just go down to dinner," Percy said hastily, shaking his head and hurrying away.

Note: Ginny actually had lines for the first time since first year ended, I believe, even if it was short. For some reason, Luna is just SO much easier to write than Ginny. I honestly don't know what it is, but I just love love Luna. She's so much fun.

Review Please!

Chapter Sixteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: The reason that Hermione has to check out a copy of Hogwarts: A History despite the fact that Harry gave her a copy for Christmas in first year was because – much like in the actual book 2 – Hermione could not fit the book in her trunk with all of her Lockhart books. And she never thought to owl for it. Or carry the book with her. Yes, really.

After making a quick stop at the Room of Requirements to pick up Ravenclaw's Diadem, Harry stuck out to the Shrieking Shack to meet Sirius.

"Womtail's back?" Sirius cut right to the chase.

Harry nodded. "I think so. At any rate, the Chamber of Secrets has been opened and Mrs. Norris was petrified."

"Mrs. Norris?" Sirius looked confused. "Is that Filch's new cat?" At Harry's nod, Sirius grinned. "Excellent. I guess he's not all bad, after all. I mean, I will still attack him on sight, but at least I have this to mitigate the betrayal."

"You do realize that Pettigrew's being possessed by Voldemort, right?" Harry asked. "So really he petrified Mrs. Norris."

Sirius looked speculative. "You know, I never thought I'd say this, but maybe Voldemort isn't-"

"Oh don't even go there," Harry interrupted. "And besides, I unpetrified her almost immediately."

Sirius looked thunderstruck and not a little horrified. "Why would you do something so heinous?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, Sirius, I get that you don't like Filch or any of his cats-"

"That the understatement of the year," Sirius muttered. "They are pure evil!"

"But look at it from my perspective. I purchased quite a bit of Mandrake Potions during the summer and if I didn't prove that they worked on the cat, no one else would have trusted me to use it on them given they thought I was the Heir of Slytherin at the time," Harry pointed out.

"I guess I see your point," Sirius said reluctantly. "But Merlin, Harry, only Lily was that prepared that she stocked up on cures for potential disasters."

Harry snorted. "To be fair, she did spend prolonged periods of time with you and your friends."

"Details, details..." Sirius said dismissively. His eyes widened. "Wait...they thought you were the Heir of Slytherin?" Harry nodded. "As in they don't anymore?" Another nod. "Details! Details!"

"I merely convinced them that I would have found some way to market my powers of petrifaction if I actually had any and apparently I've been spending so much time with Lockhart that they believe me," Harry explained, shrugging. "And let me tell you, I am really loving this whole 'not being suspected of attacking the Muggleborns despite my mother and best friend's status as Muggleborn.'"

"That's just...there are no words for that," Sirius said, shaking his head in awe.

"I know, I'm amazing," Harry said smugly. "But on to business: I retrieved the Diadem Horcrux from the Room of Requirements; can I assume you've mastered Fiendfyre?"

Sirius winced. "For the most part."

"Sirius!"

"What? Don't get me wrong, I can definitely destroy the Horcruxes with it and more or less aim it, it just takes me a little while to put it out."

"Dear God," Harry said, slightly annoyed. "You've had three months!"

"That's a lot of progress; I don't think you quite appreciate just how difficult Fiendfyre is to master," Sirius defended.

Remembering the first time he's seen it in action in a move that all at once destroyed one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, cost Crabbe his life, and made Draco forever indebted to him, Harry shook his head. "No, you're right. I'm sorry; it's just...uncontrollable fire on Hogwarts grounds? This sounds like a very bad idea."

Sirius shrugged. "Meh, it probably is, but at least there is very little risk of lycanthropy, unlike some of our other exploits."

"There is that," Harry agreed. "So is that all you've been doing all this time? Learning Fiendfyre?"

"Not quite. I also anonymously sold Kreacher – don't even ask – to the Greengrass's, found what I believe to be the Locket Horcrux, and have been sending Remus letters twice a week. He hasn't actually answered any of them, but at least he hasn't turned them over to the Aurors," Sirius told Harry.

"Well, that's something, I guess. And let me see that Locket." When Sirius handed it to him, Harry carefully inspected it. "Yes, this is definitely it. You should have at least told Kreacher you were going to destroy this before you sold him. He's not that bad, really."

Sirius snorted. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"You never will now; you up and sold him!" Harry exclaimed.

"He had his chance. I put up with him for a whole week before I resorted to drastic measures," Sirius shot back.

"How generous," Harry said wryly.

"Why would he care about the Locket anyway?" Sirius asked disinterestedly. "Or is he just obsessed with any Dark Pureblood relic?"

"Because your brother gave his life to steal it from Voldemort and entrusted Kreacher with its destruction right before he died?" Harry suggested.

Sirius just stared at him, gaping.

"Did I forget to mention that this summer?" Harry asked sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Yes, I believe you did," Sirius said once he found his voice. "My little brother, working to bring down Voldemort and discovering about the Horcruxes. He probably thought Voldemort only had one, but still...I never would have thought..."

After giving Sirius a moment to collect himself, Harry placed the Diadem and the Locket on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. "Well, shall we?"

Once the Cup joined its fellow dark objects on the ground, Sirius cast Fiendfyre and burned down the entire building and surrounding area. It wasn't very practical, perhaps, but it was certainly cathartic.

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"Harry!" Ron pulled Harry into an unused classroom.

"Why are you kidnapping me?" Harry asked, eyeing Hermione and Neville (who were already in the room) suspiciously.

"We are not kidnapping you," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"So you'll let me leave this room right now?" Harry asked, heading for the door.

"Sorry, mate, but you have to hear us out first," Ron told him, blocking the exit.

"I repeat: Why are you kidnapping me?" Harry asked again.

"Because you have a tendency to be overly dramatic and get everyone involved with things and we need to keep this quiet," Hermione explained.

"Plus you're not going to like what they came up with," Neville added.

"What they came up with?" Harry repeated. "You mean you don't agree."

"Nope," Neville said cheerfully. "Because unlike them, I actually have some modicum of faith in you."

"Modicum?" Ron looked confused.

"Some small measure," Hermione supplied automatically. "And we have plenty of faith in Harry!"

Harry and Neville both looked at her skeptically.

She flushed. "What? Just because I'm not willing to accept everything that comes out of your mouth doesn't mean I don't have faith in you! For God's sake, last week you told Percy Ron wanted a sex change!"

"I don't see your point," Harry told her bluntly.

"Oh never mind," Hermione said, irritated. "Now, while I'm not saying that I doubt your, uh, Scar's expert knowledge of the attacks, I am suggesting that perhaps the, what was it? Supposedly dead illegal rat animagus-"

"The supposedly dead illegal parent-betraying rat animagus," Harry corrected.

"Right, him," Hermione agreed absently. "He probably has some help in the castle. While Professor Dumbledore doesn't always have the

most inspired hiring practices, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is usually the only one that ever gives anyone any trouble and Lockhart doesn't really seem the type to pull something like this."

"Which is why we think it's Malfoy," Ron continued.

Harry looked at their serious faces for a moment before promptly bursting out laughing.

"Oh, so that's how it is?" Hermione asked angrily. "You can entertain notions of Great Pumpkins and Garden Gnome Conspiracies but not take attacks on the school seriously?"

With great effort, Harry managed to quell his laughter. "Sorry, Hermione, I am taking you seriously, but, really? Draco? How did you come to that conclusion?"

"We know he thinks Muggleborns are scum and said 'You'll be next, Mudbloods!' when he saw the writing on the wall on Halloween," Ron said as if it were obvious. Had Harry really been that quick to jump to conclusions back then? That was quite a depressing thought. "What more do you need?"

"Proof?" Harry suggested.

Beside him, Neville groaned. "Oh, you really should not have said that..."

Harry was puzzled. "Why not?"

"They have a plan to make Polyjuice Potion so we can sneak into the Slytherin Common Room, pose as Crabbe and Goyle, and ask him directly if he's responsible. Blatantly ignoring the fact that no one in their right mind would confide in those two, they also want to steal some of the ingredients to make the Potion from Snape's private supply by blowing up a cauldron – potentially hurting and/or killing anyone in the immediate area depending on what we're making and if they swallow any of the Potion – as a diversion," Neville said shaking his head. "I told them that not even you would go for that."

"Of course not," Harry said, shocked. "That kind of safety risk is just unacceptable. What's the good of finding out that Draco's involved and stopping a few couple-hour petrifications if we get half of the first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins killed?"

"Then find a different way for us to get the ingredients," Hermione said determinedly. "Because one way or another, we're doing this. If there is any chance at all that Malfoy is involved, we have to find out. I know he's your friend and all, but look at this objectively—"

"I am," Harry retorted. "You two are the ones blinded by your hatred of him. I'll order your damn Potion, but I'm telling you, it's not him."

"How do you know?" Ron demanded. "Just because he's nice to you doesn't mean that—"

"I KNOW," Harry interrupted again. "But how could he possibly be the Heir of Slytherin? His mother is a Black and there are a lot of people with Black blood running around even if Sirius is the only living wizard to have that name."

"Maybe your godfather is the Heir of Slytherin!" Ron had a new theory.

"Why would my fugitive godfather break into Hogwarts just to set a snake on people? There are much more efficient ways to kill people."

"You said the culprit was being possessed by an evil diary," Neville, who was quickly becoming the voice of reason, reminded him.

Harry glared witheringly at him. "Thanks so much for that."

"I try."

"My Godfather would never write in a diary. He thinks having a diary automatically reduces your badass status by twenty percent," Harry explained.

"How would you know that?" Hermione asked.

Harry smirked and opened his mouth.

"And if you say your scar told you, then so help me," she threatened.

Harry shrugged. "Then I've got nothing. Another point in Draco's favor: Professor Snape is not a Parselmouth."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Hermione asked exasperatedly.

"Because Parseltongue is a hereditary trait. If Professor Snape can't speak it and thus can't possibly be the Heir, then how could Draco?" Harry asked innocently.

"There's always the possibility that Malfoy is, in fact, a Malfoy," Ron spoke up.

Harry stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Fine, don't help us," Hermione sniffed. "Ron and I can do it by ourselves since we're clearly the only ones taking the safety of this school seriously. Will you at least buy us the Potion?"

"Sure," Harry agreed. "Just make sure that the hair actually comes from the person you want to transform into and not their cat."

"What-?" Hermione began.

"Don't worry about it. Now, as you two are clearly nuts, Neville and I are off to find Luna."

--

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall called as Harry was heading into the castle after a Quidditch practice. She looked unusually grim.

"Yes?" Harry asked politely, wondering what he could have possibly done to upset her that she knew about. He drew a blank.

"Another student has been found petrified, so if you could take some Mandrake Potion up to the Hospital Wing, that would be much appreciated," McGonagall told him.

"Sure, I can go now," Harry agreed as he followed her up to the Hospital Wing. "Who is it, anyway?"

"You probably don't know him, but it is a Hufflepuff named Zacharias Smith," the Transfiguration Professor informed him.

Harry threw back his head and groaned. "Can't we just leave him like?"

"Mr. Potter!" McGonagall sounded appalled. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for your callous remarks."

"Yes!" Harry cheered.

"Mr. Potter?"

--

"Harry!" Draco shouted the minute he saw him.

"Whoops," Harry said, cursing himself for letting himself get caught. He'd been so diligent avoiding Draco recently and now it appeared that his luck was coming to an end.

"Now that I've finally managed to corner you after two months, would you care to explain this?" Draco demanded, chucking a rather thick book at his head.

After it hit him, Harry picked it up and glanced down at it. "It would appear to be Professor Lockhart's autobiography *Magical Me*. Why? Did you forget how to read or go blind or something?"

"No, I did not," Draco growled. "Have you seen the section on my parentage?"

"No, I haven't," Harry answered truthfully. After all, he hadn't bothered to read Lockhart's books as he was always forced to pay attention in class when Lockhart made him help reenact different scenes. Unlike last time, though, he didn't mind: his already top-notch acting skills were rapidly improving under all the different parts he had to play. "Not everyone is obsessed with your parentage, Draco."

"He devoted an entire chapter to how the 'touching story' of my mother's love affair with Professor Snape changed his life!" Draco yelled.

"Your mother had a love affair with Professor Snape?" Harry repeated wide-eyed.

"No, she didn't," Draco scowled.

"But you just said—" Harry began.

"Lockhart heard that ridiculous rumor you made up, believed it, published it, and now all of his mindless fangirls will believe it and this will never end," Draco complained. "I hope you're happy."

"I'm always happy," Harry said blithely. "And I don't see how you can possibly blame me. I mean, sure, I started the rumor, but I only mentioned it the one time, Fred and George did all the rest!"

"AND that time at the bookstore over the summer when you wanted to avoid getting your picture taken," Draco pointed out. "And those are only the times I know about."

"Okay," Harry conceded. "Only the two, then. But, really, it's not my fault—"

"You said it right in front of him!" Draco pointed out.

"You know," Harry said, crossing his arms. "This is why I've been avoiding you."

"Just stop spreading the rumors, okay?" Draco entreated. "Sooner or later, someone will mention it to my father."

"He hasn't heard already?" Harry asked, surprised. "But it's been months. AND he was in the bookstore the second time I said it."

"No one really wants to upset my father by implying my mother was cheating on him with a close friend of his," Draco explained. "A lot of people are scared of him and his money. I'm not really sure why he didn't catch that incident in the bookstore, but he was kind of preoccupied that day. I'm really not sure why."

"I'll make an honest effort," Harry promised.

Draco sighed. "I guess that's the most I can hope for..."

Review Please!

Chapter Seventeen

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

"Hey, Harry," Cedric greeted cordially as Harry handed over a vial of Mandrake Potion to revive Cho Chang, who wasn't technically dating Cedric yet but everyone could tell it was only a matter of time. How Harry missed that the first time he'd never know. It wasn't like they were even trying to be subtle or anything. "I never did thank you for ordering us those brooms, did I?"

"I honestly can't remember," Harry confessed. "I was literally mobbed after that came out. Well," he paused, trying to think back. "Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were the most serious offenders, which is strange because usually Gryffindors are the most exuberant. I think my own House may have been slightly annoyed that I destroyed the advantage my new brooms gave us when I gave you guys them too. As for Slytherin, well, they became convinced that I hated them because I didn't bother getting them brooms. Never mind that Draco already bought them the same kind..."

Cedric eyed Harry carefully. "You don't seem the type to buy into House prejudices like that and I think anything you say to the contrary is just in the spirit of friendly House rivalry. I also refuse to believe you could be so careless as to remember to get two teams brooms so as not to inconvenience your rival Seekers but completely forget about a third House that has a friend of yours as Seeker. Let me tell you: No one understands how you two are friends. It is the most bizarre friendship rivalry we've seen in awhile."

"What do you mean?" Harry feigned innocence.

"You have opposing views on virtually everything, you're both very visible members of the two Houses that buy into House rivalry the most, you refuse to let a certain rumor about his parentage die, you hate each other's friends, and act like rivals half the time," Cedric quickly rattled off.

"All in good fun," Harry assured him. "And if you don't think it was an accident that I didn't get Slytherin brooms, what do you think?"

"You knew what Malfoy would do and that's why you bought the other three teams brooms," Cedric speculated.

"What, do you think I'm spying on him or something?" Harry asked, pretending to be offended.

Cedric didn't seem to buy it though and simply shrugged. "How would I know? Maybe your scar told you."

Harry didn't get a chance to answer because at that moment the Mandrake Potion took effect and Cho's eyes fluttered open. "Cedric?" she asked confused. "What happened?"

Harry left her future boyfriend to explain and headed off to go visit Hagrid. He was right about possessed!Pettigrew having different victims and was glad that everyone appeared to be taking his advice about using a mirror. Still, constantly being summoned to the Hospital Wing to administer the Potion (which he refused to give up for fear that Wormtail would break into the Hospital Wing and destroy Harry's supply) was really starting to get annoying. He wished possessed!Pettigrew would just hurry up and make his move.

--

"Well that was a huge waste of time," Harry muttered. Sirius had sent him a letter via Hedwig asking why he didn't try to kill the Basilisk now as he knew how to kill one safely and was also privy to the location of the Chamber of Secrets. He'd woken up early the morning of the match against Slytherin and snuck out to Myrtle's bathroom. Myrtle had been surprised to see him but pacified once he transfigured a bar of soap into chocolate and she could pretend she could taste it.

Once Harry got to the Chamber, he encountered very little problems. It took him a minute to get back into the swing of pretending the stone carvings were actual snakes and speaking Parseltongue again – for he had been unable to utilize that particular talent of his once he was no longer a Horcrux – but he quickly made his way towards the main room. After arriving, he had encountered a little roadblock: namely, he could not make the stupid Slytherin statue open up. It had taken

him a little while, but he had eventually remembered that Riddle had said 'Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four' and the Basilisk had appeared.

Unfortunately, when Harry tried that and a myriad of other passwords, the statue remained impassive. Harry had no idea what he was doing wrong. Had Riddle done something else to prepare the Chamber in the time after his arrival and before Harry had shown up? Harry didn't think so, but who knew? Another, more likely, possibility in Harry's opinion was that Slytherin had trained or enchanted the Basilisk to only respond to the Heir of Slytherin. Harry, for all his many talents and the piece of Voldemort's soul that currently resided in him, was not a descendent. Then again, Voldemort's Horcrux WAS the one currently opening up the Chamber. Was it because Riddle's soul was whole before the Diary Horcrux and so he had more soul to put into the Diary? Or because the diary was essentially the same as the sixteen-year-old Riddle and Harry was a completely different person with a piece of Riddle trapped inside of him? Who really knew how ancient magic like that worked anyway?

When Harry arrived back in Myrtle's bathroom (after shrinking and pocketing all of the shed Basilisk skin in sight; Basilisks were so rare that it had to be worth something, right?), he found Luna eating Myrtle's chocolate and describing the taste in great detail for her.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, nonplussed.

"Did you know that there is a Quidditch Match today? The whole school has been in an uproar since they discovered you were missing," Luna responded, examining the entrance to the Chamber with great interest.

"So you came to look for me?" Harry asked. At Luna's nod, he continued. "Why here?"

"Where else would you be?" Luna replied primly. "Is this the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets?"

Crap, Luna wasn't supposed to find out about that. Actually, no one was supposed to find out about that. Still, if anyone did, he supposed

Luna was really the best person to do so. It would be simpler if he just Obliviated her, but Harry refused to do that as a matter of principle. Stupid morals and suspicions that he himself had been Obliviated a few times in his time.

"Yes," Harry said finally, hesitantly.

"I see," Luna nodded sagely. "And I can't tell anyone or else whoever is attacking the students will know that you know."

"Exactly," Harry said, relieved that she understood. "I can't get to the Basilisk because I can't find a way to access it. I think it's because I'm not related to Slytherin but I'm not sure. If people found out about the entrance, they could try to guard it but sooner or later, Pet-the diary-possessed parent-betrayer would find a way around it. And in the meantime, the panic would be incredible and we'd lose a chance to destroy the Basilisk once and for all and keep future generations safe."

"That's very risky," Luna told him solemnly. "But I trust you. Am I right in thinking that, because of the Slytherin connection, only a Parselmouth would be able to open it? Are you a Parselmouth?"

"I always did underestimate you, Luna," Harry said with a wry smile.
"Now what time is it? When does the match start?"

"About twenty minutes ago," Luna said casually.

"WHAT?" Harry screeched. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"If you were that concerned about arriving to the match on time, you really should have brought a watch," Luna chastised him.

--

Harry practically flew up to his dorm room to grab his broom and then literally flew out the window and towards the pitch.

"And Slytherin has just scored again bringing it up to 60-20 Slytherin," Lee Jordan was saying as Harry approached. "The Gryffindor team is

clearly feeling pessimistic about their chances without a Seeker. Where is-HARRY!" At first no one realize that Lee had spotted Harry, but he quickly continued. "I don't believe it: Thirty minutes into the match, Gryffindor Seeker Harry Potter finally deigns to show up. I'm not sure where in the world he was as even the Weasley twins failed to locate him, but hopefully now he'll be able to turn this thing around!"

"Jordan," McGonagall admonished. "Do try and pretend to be impartial."

"But Professor, I didn't even insult those dirty, rotten—" Lee began, smirking.

"Not insulting is not the same as being impartial," McGonagall pointed out. "Honestly, it's time like these that I wonder why I don't have a commentator from every house so that I can always be sure to have someone on hand without a personal interest in the match."

"You know you'd miss me," Lee teased before clearing his throat. "I've been instructed to inform you that Harry is not riding the same Nimbus 2001 brooms that the other 27 Quidditch players are using. He says that this is because he is not only more than good enough to outfly the other three Seekers blindfolded on his current broom but that he is refusing to use something his...friend? Rival? Who even knows what they are? Anyway, he is refusing to use the same broom as Draco Malfoy. And he would also like to state publically that he believes the popular theory that Malfoy is Professor Snape's lovechild is a vicious, vicious lie and you all should forget about it."

"HARRY!" Draco shouted as Harry flew past him. "You said you'd quit it!"

"I did," Harry said innocently. "I was just going above and beyond and trying to do some damage control by stating that I believe it to be false."

"You only believe it's false?" Draco demanded. "You're the one who started it!"

"I'm sure I don't know nearly enough about your parents relationship with each and with Snape to be able to tell one way or another with any degree of certainty," Harry said delicately. There was movement in the corner of his eye. "Duck will you?"

Draco looked confused, but automatically did as Harry asked. Harry raised his wand at the Bludger he had already noticed following him and was fairly certain had been cursed by Dobby and cast a quiet, "Reducto."

As the Bludger exploded, Harry spotted the Snitch and dove after it. Draco, reeling from the explosion, did not see Harry's move until he was halfway to the Snitch and even though he shot after him, he was too late to stop Harry's hand from closing over the Snitch.

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"How could you be so reckless, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall demanded after the match. "I know that you have little regard for the rules, but this is ridiculous. You could have seriously injured yourself and Mr. Malfoy and you destroyed Hogwarts property. As much as this pains me to do so, I have no choice but to assign you detention every Saturday night for month and to take 50 points from Gryffindor."

Harry had honestly never considered that he could have hurt Draco once the Bludger exploded, but was thankful none the less that he was alright. As for his 'punishment', well... "Who am I to be serving detention with?"

"Professor Lockhart has already asked for you personally," McGonagall told him, her voice laced with slight distaste. She never had thought very highly of the old fraud.

"Excellent," Harry grinned. Fifty points was about the same amount he and Hermione managed to earn on an average day – to his eternal shame and Hermione's delight – and as for the detentions... "He promised me he'd teach me all about how to answer fanmail and tell normal letters apart from the nasty kind that either hex you or have something wretched inside of it without opening it," Harry beamed.

McGonagall looked annoyed, but since teachers could technically assign whatever they wanted for detentions as long as it was legal, she could do nothing.

--

That night, as the obligatory ‘Gryffindor is Better Than All the Other Houses For Whatever We’ve Managed to Do Now’ party was winding down, Hermione and Ron cornered him and cast a privacy charm to the area they were standing in. Neville hadn’t bothered to come over and was instead chatting amiably with Ginny, so Ron had to go and physically drag him over. Not before Ginny kicked him and accused him of trying to monopolize all their friends, though. Hm. When did Neville and Ginny become friends? Harry really would have to look into that. Perhaps it was when he was off doing whatever he happened to feel like and Ron and Hermione were ‘investigating’ Draco. After all, Neville had stayed with the Weasley’s for a month over the summer and with Ginny nice and non-possessed, there was nothing stopping them from hanging out when Neville’s other friends ditched him.

“How did he do it?” Hermione demanded once Ron stopped complaining about demon sisters.

“How did who do what?” Harry asked, honestly having no idea what she was talking about.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. “How did Malfoy fix that Bludger?”

“You think Malfoy fixed the Bludger?” Harry asked carefully. “I’m the one who blew it up.”

“That was some explosion, too,” Ron grinned. “And did you see the look on Malfoy’s face? Priceless.”

“That Bludger was following you around,” Hermione explained. “It must have been hexed and who else could have benefited from it besides Malfoy?”

"How could you tell it was following Harry around?" Neville asked reasonably. "The game only lasted five minutes once Harry decided to show up. Where were you anyway?"

"Bathroom," Harry deadpanned.

"For four hours?" Neville asked skeptically.

"When you gotta go..." Harry began slyly.

"Ew!" Hermione interrupted. "Honestly! And I'm positive that Bludger was following Harry around. Still, Madam Hooch checked the balls before the game starts and nothing was wrong then."

"Wait...she checked the balls for signs of tampering with her wand?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked at him strangely. "Yes. How else would she do it?"

"Damn. There goes my Squib theory..." Harry muttered.

Hermione didn't understand. "What-?"

"Never mind," Harry cut her off. He didn't think he had ever mentioned his theory from the year before about Madam Hooch being a Squib when she failed to use magic to do basic things like break Neville's fall during their first flying lesson. "Do you honestly think that Draco is skilled enough at magic he could bewitch a Bludger? All Quidditch balls have several layers of enchantment to protect them from tampering and make them damn near impervious to magic. Draco's only a second year. I'm widely viewed as a freaking prodigy – God knows why – and I don't' think I could have tampered with that Bludger."

"Then what do you suggest happened?" Hermione demanded, folding her arms across her chest.

"House Elf with a grudge?" Harry suggested.

"I thought House Elves loved you. I mean, they did adopt you," Ron pointed out.

Hermione glared at him. "You are so not helping."

Ron shrugged. "I read it in the Quibbler."

Hermione looked like she dearly wished to strangle him.

"What?" Ron asked defensively. "I got a free subscription after I won their Unusual Creature Crossword Puzzle. It was really cool. They could tell who finished it first because once it was completed you tapped your wand to it and said 'Submit' and if you were right, your paper asked for your name and when you wrote it down, it transmitted the information to the Quibbler."

"But it's all a bunch of rubbish!" Hermione insisted.

"If you two are going to start arguing again, can I go back to the party?" Neville asked. They ignored him, so Neville turned to Harry.

"You might as well," Harry told him. "They might be awhile."

"Are you coming?" Neville asked. "Or are you going to make things worse by adding your own commentary and reminding them of more incidents to be upset about again?"

"Tempting as that is, no," Harry shook his head. "I'm heading to bed."

"Already?" Neville was understandably surprised. Harry rarely was in bed before midnight and it was only 10:30.

"I have a House Elf with a grudge to meet with, remember?"

"I thought you were kidding," Neville said mildly.

"I wasn't," Harry assured him. "Well, at least about the House Elf part. He actually has a bit of an obsession with me, but he took a knife for me once, so I'm not going to yell at him about it."

"Whatever," Neville said, heading towards the food table and waving at Ginny.

When Harry reached the empty dorm room, he saw Dobby waiting for him on his bed.

"Hello Dobby," he said pleasantly in his best Dumbledore impression. He had spent hours perfecting it in front of a mirror but try as he might, could never manage that twinkling eye thing that was such an essential part of the act. Perhaps it was just a side-effect of using legilemency?

Dobby looked very nervous and near tears. "Harry Potter came back to school."

"I told you I would," Harry said. "And I'm not leaving no matter what you try. Stealing Ron's Dad's car to drive to the Hogwarts Express was kind of fun and the fixed Bludger was really only a mild inconvenience, but even if you truly do something that might make me want to leave, I won't do it. You know why?"

Dobby shook his head.

"Because I'm stubborn as hell and will probably just view that as a challenge," Harry replied matter-of-factly.

"Harry Potter does not understand!" protested Dobby desperately. "Dobby has heard about the Great Harry Potter and what he has done already. He is being good to all creatures and the House Elves love him. Harry Potter must not stay at Hogwarts and be killed! He must leave and continue to do good!"

Harry thought that Dobby's account was rather too generous, but that was Dobby all right. "Look," Harry said gently. "I know about the diary. I know about the Basilisk. I know who has the diary right now and I know that he is going to want to get me involved. I also know how to kill both the diary and the snake and am fairly certain I know how to stop the man. I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of myself."

“Dobby has no doubt that Harry Potter can, but Dobby does not like to take chances and does not want to lose such a great and powerful wizard. Dobby had no idea the Great Harry Potter was so clever!” Dobby gushed, tears springing to his eyes again.

“Yeah, yeah...” Harry said dismissively. He heard footsteps; someone was coming. Just as he was about to tell Dobby to go, a thought occurred to him. “Wait...Didn’t Draco order you not to try to save my life or to try and drive me from the castle?”

To Harry’s surprise, Dobby looked downright mischievous. “Dobby wasn’t trying to save the Great Harry Potter’s life nor was he trying to send him away from Hogwarts. Dobby was trying to break Harry Potter’s arm.”

And with that, Dobby was gone.

Harry had definitely underestimated him.

Review Please!

Chapter Eighteen

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Someone mentioned that it seemed like everyone who died now has knowledge of the future and I want to correct that misconception. Only Harry and Sirius have future knowledge because it isn't dying that's important, it's going through the Veil. Fred's slip of the tongue when he looked into the Mirror of Erised means that he has a crush on Angelina, that's all. As for Dobby, if he had future knowledge, he'd realize that Harry has the whole basilisk situation more-or-less under control and either way has already dealt with the Chamber of Secrets once. The fact he resorts to...unconventional methods of trying to get Harry from Hogwarts is just because Draco stopped him from trying to save Harry and Dobby is just being resourceful. Sorry for any confusion.

Harry awoke the next morning to the sensation of three stinging hexes cast in quick succession. "Ow!" he complained as he reached for his wand and disarmed his unknown assailant. "What was that for?"

"Sorry Harry," Percy said apologetically. "But I've heard that trying to wake you up conventionally just gets you hexed for your trouble."

"So you thought you'd get in a preemptive strike?" Harry asked, annoyed, as he tossed Percy his wand back. "What's so important that you're waking me up at this ungodly hour?"

"It's 8:30," Percy informed him, rather pompously. Harry rather marveled at the prefect's ability to sound pompous even when doing such mundane things as giving the time. Draco had that same tendency sometimes. It must be a Pureblood thing.

"No one should be up before nine on a day they don't have class unless it is a matter of life or death," Harry said seriously. "And I'm sure Ron and Neville have explained what happens when people do wake me up. And considering that those are two of my best friends, imagine how badly I'd hex anybody else..."

Percy gulped. "Indeed. Well, as it turns out, this is an emergency. My sister was petrified last night."

"Ginny?" Harry repeated disbelievingly. Talk about ironic. She was about the last person Harry would have every expected to get petrified – aside from himself, of course. Clearly Riddle was getting fed up with the lack of results his basilisk was getting due to Harry's ready supply of Mandrake Potion and had decided it was open season instead of bothering with verifying someone's blood status. Not like Pettigrew would even have a way of finding that out, unlike Ginny. "What was she even doing out? There's no way a basilisk could fit in the Gryffindor Common Room, and chances are if it did, someone else would have noticed it."

"Yes, well," Percy continued, looking a bit awkward. "She wasn't in the Common Room...and neither was the boy they found her with."

Harry choked. "Boy? She's bloody eleven!"

Percy peered curiously at him. "Most people your age wouldn't reach that conclusion quite so quickly, if at all."

Harry shrugged. "Since when have I ever been 'most people'? So who was with her? And are they both alright?"

"Neville Longbottom," Percy replied promptly. "I believe he is a friend of yours. Do you have any idea what Ginny and Neville were doing out after curfew together? They weren't very far away from the Fat Lady and Peeves was found petrified nearby, so they probably saw the basilisk through him."

"Wow," Harry said, somewhat shakily. "That was lucky." To think that they hadn't even thought to bring a mirror! If Peeves hadn't happened to be there...that never would have happened the last time. Perhaps it was because Harry's timely interventions meant that no one was petrified for long that no one was taking the threat seriously this time? That could be a problem. He'd have to give Gryffindor a lecture about that later and hoped they spread the word.

"Indeed," Percy nodded. "If something had happened to Ginny..." he shook his head, leaving the thought unfinished. "Follow me."

--

"You killed my cat!" Filch accused the moment the two stepped into the Hospital Wing.

Harry blinked. "Unless I'm very much mistaken – which is a very real possibility given my almost-constant sense of *déjà vu* – didn't we already have this conversation?"

"You did," Dumbledore said gravely. "But alas, Mrs. Norris was attacked again last night."

"That's, what, four people?" Harry asked. At Dumbledore's nod, he continued, "That's quite a lot for one attack. Oh, here," he handed Madame Pomfrey three vials of Mandrake Potion. "Sorry I don't have one for Mrs. Norris, but I had only heard about Neville, Ginny, and Peeves."

"SHE DOESN'T NEED YOUR BLOODY POTION, SHE'S DEAD!" Filch roared.

"Oh," Harry said quietly, taken aback. He hadn't expected that. His friends and fellow students, though tending to get more careless as time went by, at least had the option of carrying around a mirror. Mrs. Norris not only hadn't had a chance in that regard, but apparently hadn't been standing behind Peeves at the time of the basilisk's appearance. He felt horrible for Filch. Granted, the man was unpleasant in the extreme and Harry had often fantasized about killing that accursed cat, but he would never have actually done it. She was all Filch had, really, and being the Squib caretaker in a school full of wizarding children who hated him...Harry resolved to write to Mrs. Figg the minute this was over. He had an idea.

"I'm sorry," Harry said lamely.

"No you're not," Filch said bitterly. "You hated her the way everyone always hated her. She wouldn't have given you any trouble if you'd

just follow the rules. If those two," he jerked his head towards Ginny and Neville, "had just stayed in their Common Room where they belonged, this never would have happened. It never should have happened." With that, Filch stormed out of the Hospital Wing.

Harry stood there awkwardly until he heard Ginny start to cough. "Are you okay?" he asked, rushing to her side.

"Yeah, I-what happened?" she asked slowly.

"You were attacked by the basilisk last night. It killed Mrs. Norris and petrified you, Neville, and Peeves," Harry explained.

"I never thought I'd say it," Neville spoke up, also awake now, "but we really owe him one. Let's also never mention this to him lest he tries to enlist our help in some inane prank that will earn us detentions every day for a month."

"Or cost us hundreds of House Points," Ginny agreed.

"On the other hand," Harry said quickly. "You do owe him your lives."

"If you're that desperate to lose hundreds of House Points, why don't YOU work with Peeves to pay him back for saving us?" Neville shot back.

Dumbledore looked outright shocked at the thought of anyone actively seeking to lose points. After mulling it over for a moment, he decided that Neville must be kidding and still coping with his recent traumatic experience. "What were you and Miss Weasley doing outside of your Common Room after curfew, Mr. Longbottom?" he asked.

"Well..." Neville began, sounding a bit embarrassed.

"Ron was giving us a hard time because he wanted Neville to go over by him and Hermione but he didn't want me there and when Neville said he'd rather keep talking to me, Ron blew up and started accusing me of trying to steal all of his friends," Ginny said bluntly.

"So we left. We didn't go far and we didn't think anything would happen-"

"But it did, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said gently.

"I know," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

"I hope you learn from this that the curfew was put in place to protect you, especially now that there is a basilisk on the loose. Still, that's twenty points from Gryffindor," Dumbledore informed them gravely.

Given the serious nature of the discussion, Harry held himself back from cheering.

--

A couple weeks later, Harry himself had almost settled into the strange pattern of reflection-checking, random petrifications, and almost instant revivals. Almost, but not quite, because unlike everyone else he had the memory of what had happened the last time the basilisk was unleashed.

Currently, he was standing in the Great Hall with Ron, Hermione, and Neville waiting for the first (and only, to Harry's recollection) meeting of the Dueling Club to begin.

"I'm just saying, I don't see how nobody's heard about any of this," Hermione was saying. "I mean, for God's sake, the attacks started a month and a half ago!"

"Who would write home about this?" Ron asked, looking at her as if she were mental. "Our parents would pull us out of school faster than you can say 'Harry has an unlimited supply of Mandrake Potion and we all check around every corner with mirrors so we're really not in much danger.'"

"Ron, you could do quite a bit by the time you say all of that," Neville said, amused. "Isn't the normal expression 'Faster than you can say Quidditch'?"

"Yeah, but I figured my way is more appropriate to the situation," Ron replied.

"I do not have an unlimited supply," Harry corrected him. "In fact, I really need to order some more. I'm just glad everyone does keep using mirrors or else things could start to get serious."

"Could start?" Hermione repeated incredulously. "Harry, there's one of the most poisonous creatures known to man travelling freely around the school and attacking students; it's already serious. And I know that no one wants to worry their parents and we do seem to be suffering no permanent damage – except Mrs. Norris, of course – but why hasn't there been any mention of this in any alternative forums? The Daily Prophet at least."

"I've been bribing them," Harry said simply.

"You've been WHAT?" Hermione shrieked.

"Keep it down," Harry said irritably. "This isn't exactly public knowledge."

"But Harry, you can't just-" Hermione began helplessly.

"Actually, I can, and let me just say that it really says something about a society if the only 'respectable' newspaper is not only owned by the government but is willing to be bribed by a twelve-year-old. And it's not like I'm doing this just for kicks, although I am perhaps enjoying making them write something that I approve of for once."

"What justification could you possibly have?" Hermione demanded.

"If certain factions hear word that Dumbledore can't keep us safe from the basilisk that is running wild through our school, they will remove him and appoint a Ministry stooge as Headmaster instead. That not only won't help, it will probably make the situation ten times worse. I don't want this to get any more complicated than it already is, and turning this into a political game will do that," Harry told her.

"Hey is that Lockhart?" Ron asked. "With Snape?"

"Are either of them qualified to teach Dueling?" Hermione asked with pursed lips.

"Maybe not Lockhart," Harry conceded. "But Snape knows a ton about Dark Arts and I gather he's a rather competent duelist."

"Perhaps," Hermione allowed. "But I still think it should be Flitwick; he was a Dueling Champion when he was younger, you know."

Harry watched as Lockhart and Snape's demonstration went almost exactly the way it had before – with Snape blasting Lockhart into a wall. Still, Harry had coached Lockhart a bit on what to do in case he was ever overpowered and didn't want to admit it and so instead of protesting that he knew Snape was going to do it all along and sounding entirely unconvincing, Lockhart went the more practical route of smiling and thanking Snape for the fine example and warning the students not to put so much power into their spells. In fact, Lockhart almost made it sound like it was Snape's mistake that had him flying into the wall, not Lockhart's. Snape, predictably, looked murderous and his hand twitched for his wand so Lockhart hastily split the observers into pairs.

Snape walked by and paired Harry and Neville together, Hermione with Millicent Bulstrode, and Ron with Draco.

"Wands at the ready!" Lockhart shouted. "When I count to–"

Lockhart didn't get any further as Ron and Draco had begun hexing each other the minute Snape's back was turned.

Looking rather put out, Snape eventually separated them and called them up to the stage so they could try again without endangering everyone around them. Lockhart had actually tried to use Harry and Neville, but Snape had pointed out that Harry never took anything seriously unless it involved extreme emotional trauma on the part of one of his friends or if someone died and Lockhart was forced to concede the point.

Snape walked over to Draco and Lockhart went over by Ron. Harry was too far away to hear what they were saying, but from the smirk on Draco's face and the alarmed look on Ron's once Lockhart dropped his wand, he had a fairly good idea of what was going to happen next. The only question was what to do about it.

"Three – two – one – go!" Lockhart shouted.

"Serpensortia!" Malfoy yelled the second Lockhart said 'go', not giving Ron any chance to react.

Harry watched dispassionately as a large, black snake burst forth from Draco's wand. Was embarrassing Ron really worth the trouble that both Draco and Snape could get in for setting a potentially poisonous snake (Harry really wasn't sure if it was but hoped that it wasn't because he just couldn't believe that Snape would be so irresponsible) on a bunch on schoolchildren? Although to be fair, it was quite impressive that Draco managed to pull off a snake conjuring at the tender age of twelve; Harry didn't think he learned how to do that until sometime either fifth or sixth year. Then again, he hadn't grown up knowing he was a wizard and playing with magic whenever his (dead) parents weren't looking, either.

Harry slowly made his way up to the stage as his peers stood transfixed by the large serpent.

"Don't move, Weasley," Snape said lazily, twirling his wand between his fingers. "I'll get rid of it..." He seemed to be in no hurry, though, so that snake had better be harmless. Harry thought he heard somewhere that the larger snakes were often non-toxic but could crush people, so setting that snake on Ron was still horribly unprofessional and – if the look on his friend's face was any indication – incredibly traumatizing. Ron was literally shaking. At least it wasn't spiders.

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart, unable to resist the opportunity to show off. He waved his wand with a flourish and there was a loud bang that sent the snake flying into the air. When it landed, it was understandably enraged and heading straight for Justin Finch-Fletchley. Again. Was he just snake bait or something?

Harry groaned. He had a plan for this, but he wasn't quite sure that it would work considering everyone was well aware that a giant snake was running around the castle. "Look, the guy who attacked you didn't mean to, he's just one of the worst wizards I've ever met. I know you're mad and probably confused as hell and certainly didn't ask for this, but if you bite anyone, you'll only get yourself killed," Harry told the snake in Parseltongue. He climbed onto the stage and beckoned the snake towards him. "Just calm down and come with me. If you just slowly come to me, they won't hurt you. I'm the only one who can understand you here and if you don't listen to me, who knows what they'll do?"

The snake looked at him for a long moment and then slowly began making its way in Harry's general direction. Draco, Harry noticed with almost malicious glee, visibly paled and gulped as the snake slithered past him. Served him right.

"For those of you who are undoubtedly concocting fantastic scenarios in your head about how I'm the Heir of Slytherin after all because I can speak Parseltongue, I want you to look very closely at my hands. See how I'm gesturing for the snake to stay on the stage with me where you won't be in any danger? See how I'm totally not endangering anyone or egging the snake on? And yes, I'm talking to you Justin and Ernie. You guys jump to conclusions more rapidly than Ron and Hermione." Harry shook his head despairingly.

Ernie bristled slightly at the implied insult. Clearly he had also noticed Ron and Hermione's proclivity for jumping to conclusions. Actually, it was more like skydiving to conclusions. "Then what were you saying to it?" Ernie challenged.

Harry almost rolled his eyes. Did Ernie honestly think Harry would be telling the snake to do something nefarious and then confess it? Maybe he would have last time, but Harry had been spending far too much time with Slytherins recently to do something quite so inane. "It's basically been variations of 'Come over by me so people don't kill you,'" he said finally.

Snape was the first to recover from the shockwaves Harry's announcement of sorts that he was a Parselmouth had sent through the room and quickly vanished the snake.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said brightly. "I'm glad you saw fit to clean up the mess you caused by telling Draco to cast that spell."

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter," Snape snapped.

Harry grinned. He had a vague suspicion that Snape knew how much he enjoyed losing points but helped him anyway in the vain hope that Dumbledore would actually let someone other than Harry win the House Cup.

"In case anyone's interested, now that my Parselmouth abilities is public knowledge, I'm here to announce that I'm willing to translate a conversation you want to have with a snake – any snake, I don't care, just bring it to me – for however long you want at two sickles per five minutes." Harry could swear that he heard Hermione groaning somewhere in the audience. "I also want to reiterate again that I am NOT the Heir of Slytherin and if I were then I definitely wouldn't be eating the cost of the Mandrake Potions and start charging for them. But no, instead I am giving them out for free to anyone who needs them with no benefit for myself." Harry paused. "Well, technically I'm using them as a tax deductible, but other than that, it's completely selfless. Remember, anytime you want to talk to a serpent, let me know. Now, if that's all, it's been a great Dueling Meeting, but now I'm off to bed."

With that, Harry walked off the stage and out of the Great Hall, leaving a largely-stunned audience behind him.

Review Please!

Chapter Nineteen

Note: Snape is fully aware of Harry's distaste for gaining points, but since he desperately wants Slytherin to win the House Cup, he is willing to play along since he knows it would take a bloody miracle for Dumbledore not to hand Harry the Cup on a silver platter.

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"Harry, I'm glad I caught you," Percy said eagerly, springing up as Harry descended the dormitory staircase first thing the next morning.

"Given you appeared to be waiting for me, that's not really all that surprising," Harry said yawning. "Still, at least you didn't try waking me up this time."

"Yes, well...I wanted to ask you what the hell you thought you were doing?"

"Going down to breakfast?" Harry suggested.

"Not right now," Percy said impatiently. "Last night."

"Weren't you there?" Harry asked innocently.

"No, I was...busy..." Percy said, looking a little embarrassed.

"With Penelope?" Harry smirked.

"That is none of your concern, Harry," Percy said stiffly, his ears reddening.

"I'm just teasing, Percy; I'm glad you have a girlfriend," Harry said sincerely.

"Thank you," Percy gave Harry a small smile. "I'm going to be honest with you: You are a huge disruptive influence and I'm fairly certain that I should at the very least dislike you. For some reason, I don't. Mum seems determined to make you a part of our family, as do Ron and the twins. You yourself don't seem all that opposed to the idea.

As such, it always unnerves me when you do things like this and either put yourself in danger from vigilantes who want to 'stop you' because they think you're the Heir of Slytherin now or just outright hate you."

"I appreciate that Percy," Harry told him. "I'm not trying to worry anyone; I just think I know what I'm doing."

"You think?" Percy repeated faintly. "You THINK? Now I'm even more worried..."

--

"You're a Parselmouth!" Hermione exclaimed as Ron and Neville shoved Harry into an empty classroom. Harry really didn't want to have this conversation, now or ever, but he was thankful his friends at least had the sense to make sure he wasn't overheard.

"So I announced last night," Harry said neutrally.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Ron demanded, upset. He seemed to be even more worked up than he was last time, although it had been awhile so Harry wasn't positive. Perhaps it was because last time even though Harry's unexpected ability was the same, this time Harry had known about it, what it was called, and exactly what being a Parselmouth implied so it was more like he had been deliberately keeping this from them? That was all true, but Harry didn't think Ron would appreciate if Harry told him that he didn't feel like dealing with the hassle of telling him and having to worry about Ron keeping something this big under wraps. Ron would never purposely expose his secret, but he was also about as subtle as Voldemort, if less violent.

"Everyone always freaks out when they hear about it," Harry explained. "And really, how often does the subject of talking to snakes come up in daily conversation?"

"You'd think it would be something you might want to mention when there has been a basilisk going around petrifying people for the last few weeks," Neville sounded a little annoyed.

"I know, I know," Harry agreed wearily. "But it really isn't that big of a deal. I haven't been anywhere near the basilisk and aside from occasionally hearing it moaning about how it wants to kill people as it rushes past me, I haven't seen any indication of her presence."

"Her?" Ron repeated. As Harry opened his mouth to explain, he shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Don't you think that the constant petrifications might count as a sign of the basilisk's presence?" Neville asked rhetorically.

"This is a huge deal!" Hermione insisted heatedly. "Being a Parselmouth is what Salazar Slytherin was most famous for—"

"Well, that and his being a Pureblood fanatic," Neville muttered to Ron, who grinned.

"Now the whole school is going to think you're his ancestor!" Ron cried.

Harry stared at him. "Why would they go and think a silly thing like that for?"

"Because it won't occur to them that it's possible to be a Parselmouth and not related to him as Parselmouths are so rare?" Neville put forth tentatively.

"I bet they're not nearly as rare as everyone makes them out to be and anyone who doesn't want to get saddled with the label of 'Dark Wizard in Training' – which, true or not, would definitely be a bit of a setback – would make sure to keep that ability hidden," Harry disagreed. "And that wasn't what I meant anyway."

"What did you mean?" Neville asked, confused.

"I meant that unless they're all a bunch of morons—" Harry began.

"Which you have a tendency to think anyway," Hermione cut him off.

"True, but unless they are even more hopeless than I had originally thought, they would not think that I am his ancestor, but rather his descendent," Harry finished. "Unless they subscribe to some crazy time-travelling theory where I am my own great-ancestor or something."

"Kind of like the conspiracy theories in the Quibbler that you and Luna believe?" Hermione asked innocently.

"Of course not, Hermione," Harry scoffed. "Everyone knows you can't be your own ancestor."

"Really?" Hermione asked, wondering how that was any more farfetched than some of the other things she'd heard Harry, Luna, and occasionally Ron (curse him for winning that lifetime subscription) debating. "How so?"

"It's all about genes, Hermione," Harry began patiently. "I don't expect you to know much about them, but you know what DNA is, right?"

Hermione nodded even as Ron and Neville started to look lost.

"Well, if you have a child that child will have half of your genes and by the same principle if you have any grandchildren they will have roughly a quarter of your genes," Harry continued. "The likelihood of you contributing exactly the right half of your genes in order to match with the genes your partner is contributing is so low that the odds aren't even worth calculating. That makes it virtually impossible for you to be your own child or grandchild, although the probability does go up slightly after each generation. In any event, it would be a case of incest and your family would be stuck in constant cycle if you went back in time and lived the rest of your life in the past. In my case, I also have the benefit of knowing that Salazar Slytherin is an established person so even if no such person were to exist, I wouldn't choose that as a pseudonym. In fact, seeing as how it was over a thousand years ago, I probably wouldn't bother with a pseudonym at all."

"I'm...not quite sure I follow all of that," Hermione admitted. The girl was brilliant, but she was also only twelve.

"You don't have to," Harry assured her. "Just know that I'm right."

"That's a dangerous precedent to set," Hermione told him seriously.

"Then don't have this be precedent; just this once," Harry said.

"That's how all these things start," Hermione countered.

"If you're not his descendent," Neville put extra emphasis on the disputed word so as not to have to endure any more of Harry's attempts to clarify, "then how can you speak Parseltongue? Or do you not know?"

"I inherited it from Voldemort and he's a descendent of Slytherin," Harry said casually.

"YOU'RE DESCENDED FROM YOU-KNOW-WHO?" Ron shouted, shocked and horrified.

"Of course not," Harry said, looking sick. "Can you imagine the likes of him reproducing? That's the stuff of nightmares, right there."

"But you just said—" Neville protested.

"What, so now I can't inherit something from someone I'm not related to?" Harry demanded indignantly.

"Generally no," Hermione told him.

"Except if you're talking about Gringotts, but even then most people are related to each other anyway. As Harry continues to point out," Ron said, a little bitterly.

"Only when Draco's around," Harry said defensively. "And besides, if you're going to be all nit-picky, then I'm not technically a Parselmouth."

"You can talk to snakes. That makes you a Parselmouth," Neville said bluntly.

"Oh anyone can talk to snakes," Harry said dismissively. "It's getting them to answer back that's the trick. But anyway, my scar – which I got from that Killing Curse Voldemort shot at me – is a Parselmouth. If I were to ever lose it, I would be completely unable to interact with British-Serpents."

"How could you possibly know that?" Hermione demanded. "Better questions: How could you lose a scar?"

"Easy. Kill Voldemort," Harry said shortly.

"You're not making any sense. Again," Ron added as an afterthought.

"Whatever," Harry said, exiting the classroom and being almost immediately set upon by a small crowd of over-eager Slytherins, all of them holding a snake. "You guys go on without me; I might be awhile."

--

"Oi! Harry!" Fred called out. "We wanted-"

"To let you know-" George continued.

"How impressed we were-"

"With your little stunt at the-"

"Dueling Club Meeting-"

"And we hope-"

"That you continue to-"

"Always be around-"

"To inspire ickle Ronnienkins-"

"To follow in your-"

“And thus our footsteps-“

“As a first-class prankster-“

“Master Manipulator-“

“And brilliant businessman.”

Harry stared at the Weasley Twins who smiled back at him innocently. He wasn't fooled for a second. “One of these days you've got to teach me that spell.”

“What spell?” they chorused simultaneously.

“Oh come on, I'll do anything!” Harry offered.

“Sorry Harry-”

“We'd love to help you-”

“We really would-”

“But we have no idea-”

“What you are talking-”

“About or what-”

“You're smoking but-”

“We're starting to think-”

“We'd like to try some.”

“I'll give you a start-up loan on your joke shop,” Harry promised.

Fred and George exchanged glances.

“Do that and we'll talk.”

--

"Justin!" Ernie hissed urgently. "What are you doing here?"

Justin, who had been working on a Herbology project with Harry, looked apologetically at him before going over to where Ernie was trying and failing miserably to look inconspicuous behind a bookshelf. Harry himself waved merrily to Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot, who looked vaguely uncomfortable as they waved back and then returned to pretending not to listen to what Ernie and Justin were discussing.

"I'm studying," Justin said simply.

"With Harry Potter!" Ernie was appalled.

"Really? I hadn't noticed. I probably should have guessed when he kept chatting about his scar and translated three separate conversations for a Slytherin and two Ravenclaws," Justin said sarcastically.

"You know what I mean," Ernie said impatiently. "I told you to hide in the Common Room."

"So you did," Justin acknowledged.

"Then why aren't you?" Ernie demanded.

"Because I had a project to do," Justin replied.

"You could have done it in the Common Room," Ernie said sternly.

"It was a partner project and Harry's not in Hufflepuff," Justin pointed out. "Besides, letting him into the Common Room kind of defeats the purpose of hiding up there, doesn't it?"

"Why are you working with Potter, anyway?" Ernie had taken to calling Harry by his surname once he decided that Harry was secretly evil after all. Well, not secretly per se, but rather blatantly evil. In fact, Harry was delighted that everyone who thought he was the Heir was

referring to him as Potter and everyone else called him Harry – at his insistence as he had some bad memories of people who hated him calling him ‘Potter’ before making his life hell – because that way it was very easy to differentiate the mindless sheep who believed him from the mindless sheep who were ruled by fear. He supposed he really shouldn’t think of the roughly three-fourths of the school who stood by him as mindless sheep, but he knew from past experience that they were only responding to his explanations and assistance in reviving the basilisk victims.

“It’s not like we got to choose our partners,” Justin said, rolling his eyes. “You know that; you’re paired up with Lavender Brown.”

“You should have explained the situation to Professor Sprout-” Ernie began.

“What situation?” Justin interrupted.

“The situation of Potter being the Heir of Slytherin and attacking people for the hell of it and curing them for the publicity and to throw people off his track,” Ernie replied matter-of-factly.

“Even if you were right, he has to work with someone and unless you think that a half-blood like him with a Muggle-born best friend is a Pureblood Fanatic, everyone is at risk,” Justin said reasonably.

“I’d still rather my best friend didn’t insist on endangering himself trying to be all noble and Gryffindor,” Ernie muttered sourly.

“That was uncalled for,” Justin said, shuddering at the comparison.

“I know,” Ernie said, looking sheepish. “I’m sorry.”

“Harry’s always been so nice though,” Hannah said uncertainly, giving up all pretense of ignoring the two boys. “And he made You-Know-Who disappear. He can’t be all bad, can he?”

“No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who,” Ernie said, lowering his voice dramatically. “You-Know-Who cast a Killing Curse at him. No one survives a Killing Curse, let alone a baby.

Only a really powerful Dark Wizard could have possibly lived to tell the tale.”

“I’m pretty sure Harry made some big announcement sometime last year about surviving because his mother sacrificed herself for him,” Susan pointed out.

Had he done that? Harry really didn’t remember. Still, if he had then that could only work in his favor in swaying more sheep.

“Oh come on, he was a baby, what does he know about it?” Ernie scoffed.

“I completely agree,” Susan said pointedly. “He was only a baby. How could he POSSIBLY be so evil that You-Know-Who himself had to come straight over and kill him? How would he even know that Harry was a devil-child at that age?”

“Well...” Ernie trailed off, realizing that she had a valid point. “I still don’t buy the whole Mother-Sacrificing theory. I mean, is Lily Potter really the only person to have ever given their lives for someone ever? She can’t be. How in the world is Potter the only one to survive?”

“Maybe he’s the Chosen One,” Justin snarked.

Harry nearly choked. That wasn’t too far off, actually, although hopefully that could be kept quiet for a few more years.

“But-” Ernie tried again.

“Just give it up Ernie,” Susan advised.

“Fine. Don’t come crying to me when Potter petrifies you all,” Ernie sniffed and began to storm away.

“If anything, he’d come after you for smearing his name,” Susan called after him.

Ernie’s shoulders stiffened and he started walking faster.

"If Harry did that, wouldn't everyone be suspicious of him again?" Hannah asked.

Justin shrugged. "Probably. On the other hand, there's no need to tell Ernie that. And maybe now I can get back to my homework..."

--

"Potter," McGonagall's voice rang out through the suddenly silent library several hours later.

"Yes?" Harry asked politely. "Has someone else been petrified?"

"Indeed. Ernie MacMillan has been found right outside the Hufflepuff Common Room," McGonagall told him gravely.

"I see, I..." Harry trailed off as something occurred to him.

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall prompted.

"I HAVE AN ALIBI!" Harry cheered, ignoring the Death Glare Madam Pince sent his way.

"Pardon?" McGonagall asked, not understanding.

"Ever since that whole stunt I pulled at the Dueling Club, some people – Ernie being one of the most vocal – have been accusing me of attacking everyone. I never seem to have an alibi, but this time I was in here studying the whole time and have, like, thirty witnesses," Harry continued excitedly.

"Be that as it may," McGonagall said primly. "A student was still petrified."

"Oh, he'll be fine," Harry said dismissively as he followed the Transfiguration Professor up to the Hospital Wing.

"That may be true but I would like to remind you that there is still a murderous creature on the loose and it would not behoove you to be so glib," McGonagall said sternly.

"I know, I know..." Harry said. He glanced down at Ernie. "Hey! I sold him that mirror! And he still blames me! That little..."

"Harry," Dumbledore interrupted him.

"Hello Professor," Harry said warmly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm always concerned when there is a basilisk attacking my students," Dumbledore explained.

"That sounds like a good policy," Harry nodded.

"You have been almost extraordinarily helpful during this crisis and I suspect that you are somehow involved in the iron curtain of secrecy protecting Hogwarts's problems from the wizarding world at large," Dumbledore said pleasantly.

"I do what I can," Harry said, his voice non-committal.

"Let me begin by saying that I know that you have nothing to do with these attacks. However, I am quite curious: how do you know so much about the attacks?" Dumbledore's eyes bore into him and Harry was suddenly quite grateful Hermione had bullied him into mastering Occlumency when they were nineteen. Well, she and all of his other friends were twenty, but he had a late birthday.

"I've come back from the future," Harry deadpanned.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said, skeptical but intrigued.

"Oh yes," Harry nodded. "Of course, when I'm from Ginny Weasley had the Diary and was attacking only Muggleborns, Sirius Black was completely innocent of the crimes he was sent to Azkaban for – without a trial – and escaped next year, Draco Malfoy is the Master of the Elder Wand, and Snape helps euthanize you."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said again, this time blatant disbelief evident in his voice. "How did you come back, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Drapery accident," Harry said shortly. "It was very traumatic."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I wish you would be honest with me, Harry."

"Who says I'm not being honest?" Harry asked rhetorically. "But you can be assured that anything I'm not telling you is either for a very good reason, because I don't think it's relevant, or just because I don't want to deal with the consequences."

"That's rather discouraging, Harry," Dumbledore told him frankly.

"I don't know what else to tell you," Harry said shrugging.

"How about the truth?" Dumbledore suggested.

"The truth," Harry sighed, mimicking Dumbledore's response to Harry's plea for the truth in his first first year. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

"That is most unhelpful and I suspect deliberately cryptic," Dumbledore told him, sounding a little disappointed.

"Well, if it is it's probably because I got that from a reticent and secretive to a fault old man," Harry said, grinning.

"If you should decide in the future to confide in me, my office is always open," Dumbledore told him sincerely.

"Thanks Professor," Harry said, touched. "I appreciate that."

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: I'm sure that there are a whole bunch of ways that Harry could stop the whole Basilisk thing right now. Unfortunately, they haven't occurred to Harry because once the main plot of the school year is resolved, there really isn't anything to do but a huge time skip, developing a romance (at twelve?), or moving future events backwards in time (which there would be no logical reason for doing). Since Harry already won't have to deal with thinking Sirius is out to get him next year, he's going to be more preoccupied with keeping everyone safe while simultaneously annoying them all than animagi-proofing the castle. Besides, if that were possible, I'm sure it would have occurred to Dumbledore at some point. He's not that lax on security.

"So," Hermione said triumphantly the day before the term ended. "We're not the only ones to think Malfoy is the Heir of Slytherin."

"Yeah, ever since you had a bunch of witnesses when Ernie was attacked, everyone has been off your case and on his," Ron chimed in.

"It's really quite fortunate that nobody realizes I could have just ordered the Basilisk to attack him beforehand," Harry mused.

His three friends stared at him. "But...you didn't, right Harry?" Neville asked finally.

"Of course not," Harry scoffed. "But the point is that I could have."

"I recommend keeping that bit of information to yourself," Neville advised. "Or else people will NEVER let go of the idea that you're responsible."

"Not that I don't fully support the idea that Malfoy is the Heir," Ron began. "But Harry...you're his friend – Merlin knows why – and shouldn't you be doing something to make people stop suspecting him?"

Harry grinned. That was a strange situation, all right. "Normally, I would," he agreed. "On the other hand, Draco is a Slytherin from an old Dark Pureblood family. To him, being the Heir of Slytherin is a badge of pride and so even though he's not responsible, he doesn't mind people thinking he is. What's more, he's the one who came to me with the idea of making everyone think he's the Heir and I went along with it because the truth will come out soon enough and the teacher's totally don't believe him anyway, so it's not like it really does any harm."

"If that's the case, why are you so sure he's not?" Hermione asked reasonably. Or, as reasonably as one could be when espousing the theory that Draco Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin. "He could be playing you and just asking for help in taking the credit that he already deserves."

"You mean other than the fact that he's twelve, not a Parselmouth, and thinks being able to attack people with a giant snake is 'wicked'?" Harry asked. "Seriously, even Voldemort didn't go around setting the Basilisk on Muggleborns until he was sixteen."

Ron flinched. "Stop saying that!" he said, annoyed.

"Stop telling me not to say that," Harry shot back. "It's not going to do any good and getting into another argument about this with you will just make everything take twice as long."

"The fact that we're talking to you automatically makes everything take twice as long as it normally would," Neville pointed out.

"Then perhaps Ron should not be so eager to make everything take four times as long as it normally would," Harry said mildly. "But that reminds me: I've got your Polyjuice. Now go away and don't try to drag me into this."

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Hermione woke them up at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning, proving that she was indeed sadistic enough to be the daughter of dentists.

"You have five seconds to tell me what you're doing in here before I hex you," Harry growled sleepily. He and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team (plus Lee) had just had their monthly all-night tournament. This time it was exploding snap and since they wouldn't have Quidditch Practice the next morning, Wood joined in for once. It was great fun, naturally, but unless Hermione had a good reason to be barging in there twenty minutes after he had fallen asleep...

"The Polyjuice Potion is ready!" Hermione exclaimed excitedly, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

"Of course it's ready," Harry snapped, not a morning person under the best of circumstances. "I gave it to you last week."

"Well, yes," Hermione admitted. "But I thought we could use it today."

"Breakfast isn't for another three hours! How could we possibly hope to use it before then?" Harry demanded. Then, realizing his mistake, he corrected, "And by 'we' I mean 'you.' I still think this is stupid."

"I think half the things that you do are stupid—" Hermione began heatedly.

"Only half?" Ron muttered, covering his head with a pillow to block out the sunlight.

"Maybe she just doesn't pay enough attention," Neville murmured back, copying Ron's method of refusing to admit it was morning.

"But that doesn't mean I try to stop you!" Hermione concluded.

"Since when have I been trying to stop you?" Harry asked incredulously. "I bought you the bloody potion! And let me tell you, that did not come cheap."

"And I'm sure you made the money back within twenty-four hours," Hermione said dismissively. "Besides, you only helped so we wouldn't endanger our Potions class."

"Oh please," Harry laughed. "Like I couldn't have stopped that. The only reason it would have worked on Snape was because he didn't know you were planning it and would have undoubtedly have been busy with the other kids who were trying to kill each other."

Right then, Hedwig flew in and dropped a medium-sized package on Harry's head. Ouch.

"Okay, that's it," Harry said determinedly. "I don't care what day it is; it is just too damn early. Out, all of you."

"But Harry..." Hermione protested. "The potion-"

"Out!" Harry shouted, waving his wand and banishing Hermione down the stairs.

"Thanks for that, mate," Ron said, snuggling deeper into his pillow.

"What part about all of you didn't you get?" Harry asked, raising his wand again.

"But-" Neville began, horrified.

"Sorry," Harry said apologetically. "But she won't stop until you guys go help her with that."

"It's good to know where your priorities lie," Ron muttered as he reluctantly got up.

"Yeah, well, I need sleep," Harry told him. "Oh, but take this." Harry waved his wand at his trunk and a vial with a few hairs floated out and into Ron's empty hands.

"What's this?" Ron asked, inspecting it carefully.

"A few of Pansy Parkinson's hairs," Harry explained. "Tell Hermione that Polyjuice potion should NOT be used with cat hair."

"How did you—" Neville began. "Wait, don't answer that. You're scar told you," he said sarcastically.

"You know me too well," Harry said as he waved his wand once more to shut the curtains and went back to sleep.

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When Harry finally got around to getting up and opening his presents, he found that the Dursleys had actually sent individual presents. Uncle Vernon had sent him a cross and a note saying how he was going to hell for worshipping Satan and proving that once again he knew nothing about magic, Aunt Petunia had sent a book on gardening which he immediately gave to Neville, and Dudley got him a bunch of CDs which (due to the lack of electricity at Hogwarts and his own lack of a CD player) Harry strung up and hung around the Common Room, creating a cool rainbow effect when the light hit them. Harry had sent Aunt Petunia some rare but Muggle seedlings, Dudley some magical sweets that would probably freak him out for about twenty minutes before he gave in and ate them all within the day, and Uncle Vernon twenty galleons so as to torture his Uncle with the dilemma of exchanging his wizarding coins for Muggle money or not accepting free money. This would probably agonize him for days.

Hagrid sent him a large tin of treacle fudge and Harry had sent him six Abraxan. Harry had decided pretty early on that he was going to celebrate the success of his money-making ventures by going all out this Christmas. Ron gave him Flying with the Cannons, which was an interesting enough read even if he despised that team. In turn, Harry had sent him a new wand. Hermione got him a luxury eagle-feathered quill and Harry (so help him) gave her a time-turner. Fortunately, he also gave her a guide on how to use it, straight from the Department of Mysteries itself. It really was nice sometimes that the Ministry was so corruptible as Harry was almost certain that what he did was worth a good ten years in Azkaban. The Weasleys had sent Harry a new hand-knitted jumper and a plum cake and Harry had responded by purchasing them a House Elf - something he was NOT looking

forward to Hermione finding out about. It's not like he wasn't all for House Elf rights, it was just that Dobby was the only House Elf he had actually met who wanted them and he figured he should probably stay away from enacting new magical creature legislation until he had at least graduated. Things like that were very time-consuming, as he knew from experience. And the Weasley's were in Egypt visiting Bill for Christmas. If they could afford that, then why was it such a big deal that they won the 1000 Galleon Draw over the summer and went back? Maybe it was cheaper when it was just the two of them and not seven of them.

Ginny had gotten him some owl treats for Hedwig and he had gotten her a year's supply of Honeydukes chocolate because he didn't know her as well as he might have liked. Fred and George had sent him several seemingly innocuous desserts that he was afraid to try without a lengthy examination and a possible guinea pig and he had gotten them a book on inventing potions. He knew they could do it on their own, but this might make things go a little smoother. Tonks had sent him some of Sirius's old schoolbooks that he and Harry's father had written all over when they were supposed to be listening in class and Harry had gotten her a rather expensive ring charmed with an anti-clumsiness spell for when she needed to be undercover once she finally got through Auror Training. Technically, he supposed she could wear it all the time, but he knew that Tonks had kind of liked being clumsy for whatever reason. Maybe she just saw it as integral to her personality? Percy had gotten him a book on the OWLs, which was just so typically Percy that it wasn't even funny and Harry had gotten him a set of new school robes as Harry knew pomp like that was important to Percy. Neville had gotten him book on Poltergeists as apparently Harry was starting to remind him of one (and dear God he was getting a lot of books. He could really sympathize with the Headmaster's desire for a pair of nicely woolen socks now and resolved to purchase some for himself at the earliest possible opportunity) and Harry had gotten him a couple gillyweed plants. Not that he was thinking ahead to fourth year or anything.

Cedric had gotten him a book of '1000 Things I Never Had the Nerve to do at Hogwarts' and a note remarking that Harry had already done three dozen. Needless to say, Harry now had a new ambition in life. Harry himself had sent Cedric a book on the history of the Triwizard

Tournament complete with task analysis and a note saying, ‘You never know. But my scar does.’ Draco had gotten him a top-of-the-line broomstick serving kit and Harry had gotten him the most extensive wizard genealogy in all of Europe. That probably wasn’t the best plan if he wanted Draco to get over all of that Pureblood crap he kept spouting, but he knew Draco would love it and it was Christmas... Luna had gotten him a pair of X-Ray glasses that genuinely worked and looked just like his regular glasses so he knew he’d have fun with being able to look even more omniscient than usual. It made him very glad he had hired two dozen experienced trackers to find her a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, which turned out to be some sort of pig-like creature. He knew that would just make her day. He got Professor Dumbledore a pair of woolly mittens to go with his woolly socks, Professor Lockhart a book on calligraphy so he could have fun making his signature even more elaborate, an anonymous grant for Professor Snape to continue doing research, and Professor McGonagall a brand-new chess set, also anonymously. And of course, he sent the entire Hogwarts population a candy cane and everyone who had expressed faith in him a box full of chocolate.

By the time Harry was finished admiring his presents and deigned to leave the Common Room, it was lunchtime and Harry was just in time for a quick bite to eat before he joined the traditional all-afternoon snowball fight. By the time that ended, it was dinner and Ron, Hermione, and Neville were getting up halfway through the meal to go chasing after Crabbe and Goyle.

“Feel free to just ditch me; it’s okay, I don’t mind!” Harry called after them.

“If you don’t mind then why are you yelling at them?” Luna asked sitting down across from him and plopping his gift down next to her.

“I like yelling?”

“I’m sure you do; you make all-school announcements in the Great Hall often enough. Thank you for Norbert,” Luna said breezily.

“N-Norbert?” Harry repeated. Like the dragon? Well, that was really a Norberta, but he wasn’t supposed to know that yet. What were the

odds that she would pick the same name as Hagrid? Although somehow he wasn't surprised.

"Oh yes," Luna said serenely. "I asked Hagrid about name suggestions and he got a little teary-eyed when Norbert came up, so I figured that would be a good name."

"That's just...yeah..." Harry said, not exactly eloquently.

"Strange?" Luna supplied.

"Yeah."

"I get that a lot. For that matter, don't you?" she asked.

"I do," Harry nodded. "What do you think about the theory that Draco Malfoy is the Heir of Slytherin?"

"That's ridiculous," Luna said instantly. "He would never write in a diary."

"Diary? So that means that you believe me about a supposedly dead parent-betrayer illegal rat animagus using Voldemort's old diary to open the Chamber of Secrets?" Harry asked, interested. No one had taken that part of his story seriously, even if they did believe him about the Basilisk.

"Of course," Luna nodded sagely. "It makes perfect sense."

"Not to everyone else," Harry pointed out.

"Most people don't believe in Norbert, either," Luna countered. "Although they will after he makes the front page of the next issue of the Quibbler."

"Do you ever get frustrated in your attempt to educate the shee-er, wizarding world?" Harry asked curiously.

Luna giggled at his near slip-up. "Sometimes. But if we don't do it, who will? Everyone else is just content to be stagnant for the rest of

their lives and live lives almost identical to their ancestors and their descendants.”

“Do you know which is which?” Harry asked her, realizing that the question wasn’t very clear and he should probably elaborate. Before he could do that though, Luna answered.

“It is truly sad the state of the world when so many people don’t realize that ancestors are those who came before and descendants are those who come after,” Luna said, shaking her head pityingly. “Where did your friends go?”

It was strange, but Harry and Luna never really felt the need to use transitional phrases, they just abruptly changed the subject and the other one was expected to keep up. Again, very strange, but it worked for them.

“They are off to go drug Crabbe and Goyle in order to impersonate them and Pansy Parkinson so they can go sneak into the Slytherin Common Room and try to worm a confession out of Draco,” Harry explained.

“Drugging students? Couldn’t they get expelled for that?” Luna asked, interested.

“Probably,” Harry acknowledged. Come to think of it, why hadn’t Crabbe and Goyle gone to Dumbledore in the first place? Was it because they were embarrassed or didn’t know who had drugged them? Was it because they didn’t like the most prominent champion of Muggle rights or had they simply not noticed they had been drugged? Sure they could have thought they had fallen asleep, but he and Ron had taken their clothes and locked them in a closet. “Although they could probably also get expelled from deliberately causing an explosion in Potions Class, which they were planning to do so they could steal from Snape – another offence – until I stepped in and just bought them the damn potion.”

“Polyjuice, right?” Luna asked. At Harry’s nod, she continued, “Wouldn’t Draco Malfoy admit if it because he wants people to think he is?”

Harry's blood froze. "That had honestly never occurred to me."

"So I guess you'll get a pretty interesting debriefing when they come back," Luna smiled.

"Yeah. And they will be even harder to convince of Draco's innocence than Ernie is of mine."

"What I really don't understand is this: even if the Heir was a student and a Slytherin – which is actually a reasonable assumption given the name, unless they were planning this from the beginning and wanted to deflect suspicion – why are they suspecting a second year? They should be looking for a culprit amongst the upperclassmen," Luna said sensibly. It had also amazed him just how sensible Luna could be sometimes. He had remembered her as the most bizarre person he knew (which was still true) but he supposed that since the wizarding world practically had a logic phobia and Luna was so very different than the mainstream wizard, it was almost inevitable that she would have to be.

"Simple," Harry laughed. "He's the only Slytherin they interact with on any kind of regular basis and he doesn't like them. Well, he's okay with Neville, but then, Neville is a Pureblood who doesn't buy Ron and Hermione's theory that he's the Heir and is really just going along to keep them out of trouble. Ron thinks all Slytherins are evil and the Weasleys and Malfoy seem to have some sort of blood feud going on anyway. Hermione is a Muggleborn and Draco really doesn't have very much experience with them, and so there are definite problems there. Plus he can't stand anyone who is so obviously smarter than him."

"I see," Luna said. "That really makes no sense, though."

Harry sighed. "Preaching to the choir, Luna, preaching to the choir..."

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty One

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Wow, the whole chapter turned out to just be one long conversation, didn't it? Oh well, I guess that's what happens when people try to tell a story when Harry is in the room and easily distracted. It might have actually gone quicker had Harry consented to go with them, but it's a little late now. And Harry would totally blow their cover when he couldn't resist being a smartass or mention the scandal he created surrounding Draco's parentage.

Oh, and I'd like to thank everyone that reviewed. Over 1,000 reviews in only twenty chapters...you people are great.

That night Ron and Hermione rushed into the Common Room half an hour after curfew, their eyes sparkling, with Neville trailing behind, looking rather disconcerted.

"So," Harry began, genuinely curious. "How did it go?"

"It went great!" Ron enthused. "Little bugger confessed to everything!"

"I'm still not sure that it was—" Neville began, only to be cut off by Hermione.

"Oh come on Neville; you were there. You heard him. What more proof do you need?" Hermione asked him, exasperated. Clearly this had been an ongoing discussion between them on the way back.

"Oh I don't know...some proof?" Neville suggested sarcastically. "I admit that what we've heard is damning and I wouldn't put it past Malfoy to try something like this but still. He's twelve. And it's not like he's exactly criminal mastermind material, either."

"Maybe you guys should start from the beginning," Harry proposed. "And I can be the fair and unbiased judge."

"Fair and unbiased?" Ron snorted. "You like Malfoy, remember?"

"I like you more," Harry retorted, rolling his eyes. "Although Draco is less prone to jumping to conclusions."

"No one says 'jumping to conclusions' anymore," Parvati said as she walked past them on her way to the Girls' Dormitory.

"Yeah, everyone knows it's 'skydiving,'" Lavender added, hurrying after her friend.

Once they left, Harry and his friends were the only people left in the Common Room and they could begin their tale.

"We got off to kind of a late start because Ron insisted that I use some of Pansy's hair that you apparently just happened to have with you instead of Millicent's, despite the fact that Millicent was staying over break and Pansy wasn't," Hermione began, glaring slightly at Ron for inconveniencing her.

"Hey, don't look at me," Ron said, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace. "It was Harry's idea and if Harry said that the hairs you had belonged to Millicent's cat, then its best not to take chances. Besides, it's not like Malfoy even noticed that you weren't supposed to be there."

"That is true..." Hermione mused. "I don't think he likes her very much."

"And who can blame her?" Ron laughed. "Malfoy's a git."

"Um, she said Draco didn't like Pansy, not vice versa," Harry corrected, somewhat reluctant to break the flow of their narrative lest they get sidetracked and this ended up taking all night.

"Oh. Well he's still a git," Ron said. "He-"

"Regardless of whether or not Hermione needed to use Pansy's hair or what Malfoy and Pansy feel for each other," Neville interjected pointedly. "We soon realized we had no idea where the Slytherin Common Room was."

"Why didn't you just ask me?" Harry asked.

"Why would you know where the Slytherin Common Room is?" Hermione asked.

"Because Draco is a friend of mine?" Harry offered.

"Harry, do you remember that little conversation you had with Malfoy at the end of last year about stalking?" she asked sweetly.

"Nope, not at all," Harry lied. "You were saying, Neville?"

"Right. We hadn't thought to ask you, although I realized that you would probably know because you're obsessive like that, and there really wasn't enough time for us to go back, find you, and then interrogate Malfoy."

"Considering I hadn't moved and you had an entire bloody castle to look through, I'm not so sure about that," Harry disagreed.

"How were we supposed to know you were planning to stay in the Great Hall?" Ron asked rhetorically. "We saw Luna coming up to talk to you and she might very well have convinced you to go visit those invisible zombie horses she keeps going on about."

"They're called 'Thestrals', Ron," Harry said stiffly. "And everyone knows the best time to visit them is at daybreak."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that, actually, mate," Ron continued. "I mean, I know that you both say that you can see them, but neither of you is quite right in the head and as nobody else seems to be able to, how do we know that you're not just seeing things? Or making them up?"

Harry groaned. "Great. Only two years in and I'm already being accused of being a lying schizophrenic. It's nice to know some things never change..."

"What?" Hermione asked, looking vaguely disturbed by Harry's implication that he'd been accused of having mental problems before.

"Oh, nothing," Harry said dismissively, deciding against mentioning his psychic scar for once. "And of course Luna and I aren't the only ones who can see Thestrals. I know for sure that Theodore Nott can see them, as well as most of the adults."

"Well, Nott's a Slytherin, ain't he?" Ron shrugged. "None of them are right in the head. And don't you think the adults would have mentioned something if they had invisible zombie horses pulling the carriages?"

"Not to mention why in the world they would have such bad omens working here when they could just enchant the carriages to pull themselves," Hermione added. "Plus it would be cheaper and less maintenance."

"That would be the sensible course of action, wouldn't it?" Harry agreed cheerfully. "Which is why it has never occurred to any of them. Ever."

"Luna and Harry aren't the only ones who can see Thestrals," Neville said quietly.

"You mean you can?" Ron asked, looking concerned. At Neville's reluctant nod, he began pulling him towards the door. "We'd better get you to Madame Pomfrey. I can't believe I didn't notice anything was off with you! You must think I'm the worst friend ever. Oh well, hopefully this is just because of stress—"

"I'm not hallucinating, Ron," Neville told him, sounding faintly amused.

"No, you're just seeing invisible zombie horses," Ron countered.

"You don't believe in Thestrals, Ron? That's funny; I could have sworn I heard Harry say something about them being in the Quibbler," Hermione sniped.

Harry, who had been feeling ignored, opened his mouth to say that he had said no such thing because Thestrals, despite how invisible, zombie-ish, and horse-like they were, just didn't make very interesting

news. Particularly as anyone who had made it through O.W.L.s Care of Magical Creatures could tell you that they were real.

Before he could get a word in edgewise, however, Ron continued. "I don't believe everything in the Quibbler, Hermione."

"Could've fooled me. I just don't see how invisible, zombie horses are any harder to believe in than, say, the Rotfang Conspiracy," Hermione shot back.

"I knew it!" Harry burst out. "All this time you've been looking down at us for reading the Quibbler, but you read it too! I have proof!"

Ron, Hermione, and Neville just stared at him.

"Shutting up now."

"Thestrals are real," Neville took advantage of the silence Harry's abrupt outburst had caused. "You can only see them if you've seen death, however, so not many people our age know about them. I'd hazard a guess that most of the staff would be able to see them, especially given the war..."

"How can Harry see them?" Hermione asked. "Surely he would have mentioned it if he'd seen someone die?"

Harry vaguely wondered why it was more surprising that he'd seen death than Neville. All things considering, she should think the opposite. "Uh, Hermione? I DID tell you. Quirrell, remember? Neville and I both saw it. But I could see them before. I saw my parents die."

There was a silence. Then, "When you were one, mate," Ron pointed out, with all the tact of a blind troll.

Harry rolled his eyes. "So? I still saw it."

"But you couldn't possibly have let their deaths and the implications sink in at that age and so there is no way that could have allowed you to see Thestrals," Ron replied.

"I thought you didn't believe in Thestrals," Hermione said, a little smugly.

"I didn't. I grew up in a wizarding home, though, so I've still heard about them. Charlie loves exotic creatures like that," Ron explained.

"If your brother told you about them, why didn't you believe in them?" Neville wanted to know.

"Because it sounds like something out of those bad Muggle horror movies dad sometimes watches," Ron admitted. "He loves the TB."

"TV, Ron," Harry corrected automatically. Hm, that was interesting. If Ron's father's primary source of Muggle knowledge came from cable, that would explain a lot.

"Anyway, we've somehow gotten horribly off topic so, again, finding the Slytherin Common Rooms," Neville said pointedly. "We ran into this girl and I tried asking where the Slytherin Common Rooms were—"

"But I stopped him," Hermione interrupted. "Because I recognized her as the Ravenclaw Prefect Penelope Clearwater and even though people might believe Crabbe and Goyle were stupid enough to forget where their Common Room was, Penelope wouldn't be able to help."

"You know, you'd think that Prefects would know where the other Common Rooms are in case of emergencies," Harry mused. "Come to think of it, why in the world are the Common Rooms hidden and passwords set up? Unless they feel that Polyjuice Potion or Metamorphaguses are enough of a problem to warrant the extra secrecy, couldn't the portraits just visually ID anyone and maybe putting passwords on the dormitories? And for that matter, how is it fair that just because the Ravenclaws are the most studious, they should have to answer some bizarre and abstract riddle every time they want to leave their Common Room. I mean honestly, one wrong answer and you're stuck outside? It's a wonder anyone wants to be a Ravenclaw at all..."

"Yeah, that's great Harry," Neville told him. "Not sure I want to know where you're getting your information, but try to stay focused."

"Oh, that's rich coming from you; you haven't even gotten to the Slytherin Common Room and we've been talking for over ten minutes," Harry retorted.

"I'm staying on topic just fine," Neville said defensively. "It's Ron and Hermione who won't stop bickering." Casting a quick glance at the twin looks of indignation on the faces' of the pair in question, he quickly pressed forth. "After Penelope left, we ran into Percy and Ron may or may not have started a blood feud between the House of Crabbe and the House of Weasley."

"That is so not my fault!" Ron protested.

Harry shot him a Look. He didn't know what happened but he was fairly sure that whatever Ron had said had been entirely his own fault as that was the way these things tended to work. Also, he was beginning to wish that he had gone with them after all, if for no other reason than so he could already know what happened instead of having this drag on. Almost, but not quite. After all, he and Luna had had fun. Still, this was taking quite a while. Perhaps he should look into getting a Pensieve?

"Okay, it might have been slightly my fault," Ron relented, flushing. "But how was I supposed to know that he'd take such offence to my teasing him about Penelope?"

"Oh I don't know," Hermione said sarcastically. "Because you weren't his brother but some random troll-like second year and weren't sounding like you respected his authority?"

"But I don't-" Ron began.

"And you're his brother, so that's okay," Neville told him. "But coming from Crabbe...You know how seriously Percy takes his Prefect status."

"Yeah, yeah..." Ron grumbled.

"At least you seem to enjoy blood feuds," Harry tried to console him.

Ron looked perplexed.

"Oh come on; I've seen how much you enjoy bantering with Draco. In fact, I think I'll keep a close eye on you two when you start going through puberty, just to make sure all of this isn't just UST."

Hermione, clearly the only one to understand the acronym, giggled. Ron opened his mouth angrily to demand clarification but Neville just shook his head and put a hand over Ron's mouth.

"We're probably better off not knowing," he said seriously.

Ron seemed to agree. "Right after Percy stormed off, Malfoy showed up. He took us down to the Dungeons, which is apparently where the Slytherin Common Room is and I gotta say, sucks to be them, especially this time of year. Malfoy mocked us for forgetting where the Common Room was and then immediately proceeded to not remember the password. Hermione told him what it was and—"

"Wait, wait, wait," Harry interrupted, grinning. "Hermione Granger, Gryffindor Golden Girl, told Draco Malfoy, Slytherin Bad Boy, the password to his Common Room? What were we talking about earlier about stalking?"

"Oh, so NOW you remember that," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Typical. And I just suggested 'Pureblood' because it's Slytherin and it was the first thing that came to mind." She paused. "Well, after 'basilisk' but under the circumstances, I didn't think Professor Dumbledore would let them get away with being so gauche."

"The minute we were in the Common Room, Malfoy – who seems to enjoy his blood feud with the Weasleys nearly as much as Ron does – began to talk about how much a disgrace he thought they were and how Mr. Weasley should go off and become a Muggle. Then he mentioned that the reason he was so upset was that Mr. Weasley had conducted a raid of his house a little while back and even though they hadn't found anything, there were apparently several dark artifacts hidden in the Malfoy's drawing room."

"Not for long; I sent a letter to Dad," Ron said, sounding extremely pleased with himself.

"So?" Harry asked. "Even if he knows that the Malfoys are hiding something, he can't very well act on it!"

"Why not?" Ron asked. "He can just go back and raid Malfoy Manor again."

"No he can't, Ron," Harry said, shaking his head. "A raid once when other houses were being raided might be okay. To go back, though, you'd need evidence."

"But I do have evidence. I heard-"

"That's all very well and good Ron," Harry said patiently. "Even if you completely ignore the fact that all of this is hearsay, how are you going to explain how you got the information? Are you going to mention that you, Neville, and Hermione drugged two fellow students and impersonated them? Or perhaps you dosed him with Veritaserum? God knows no one would believe that Draco told you willingly nor that he would be so careless as to talk about it outside of the confines of his Common Room. Mr. Malfoy might get a fine, loose a few possessions, but you three could get suspended if not outright expelled."

Ron's face paled. "I-I never thought of that."

Hermione was so enraged by this eventuality that she could do no more than glare daggers at Ron.

"It's highly unlikely Malfoy's father will either," Neville said finally. "I mean, Purebloods like him are more used to bribing their way out of trouble than using the law to their advantage."

"Still," Harry said thoughtfully. "It might be nice to know you're in the right for once. I'll mention it to Draco in the morning."

"But HARRY!" Ron sulked.

"Do the words 'drugged and impersonated' mean nothing to you?" Harry shook his head. "Technically, I suppose I'm an accomplice, but I could just bribe my way out of any trouble."

"You wouldn't," Hermione told him sternly.

"I know," Harry agreed. "But I could."

"That doesn't matter anyway," Neville spoke up. "Because before we left, Draco confessed to being the Heir of Slytherin."

"...But he's not," Harry protested.

Hermione sighed indulgently. "Look Harry, I know he's your friend, but he's also—"

"A cold-blooded little sociopath?" Ron suggested.

"Seriously overcompensating for something?" Neville tried.

"The victim of a severe father complex agitated by the rumors about his parentage that have been circulating for the last year and a half?" Harry offered.

"NO!" Hermione glared. "I was going to say—"

"It doesn't really matter what you were going to say," Harry told her, deciding not to even bother. "We've already had this conversation. Draco's not even a Parselmouth; he can't be Slytherin's heir."

"But he confessed!" Ron whined, looking like someone had told him Christmas was cancelled. And so was breakfast.

"He's also twelve and an idiot, Ron," Harry told him, annoyed.

"Well, can't argue with you there..." Ron mused. "Can the fact that he's an idiot be his motivation for opening the Chamber?"

"No, no it can't. I've already told you that Voldemort's the one who's opening the Chamber and he's using a supposedly dead—"

"And we've had THIS conversation before, too," Hermione cut him off.
"No one actually believes that, you know."

"Luna does," Harry said defensively and not a bit irritated at being cut off.

"Well Luna's..." Hermione paused, searching for the right word.
"Luna."

"No, really, Hermione?" Harry rolled his eyes. "And there's no point arguing about this. Draco's too much of a child to realize that he shouldn't be going around claiming credit for something like this even if he were responsible, which he's not, by the way. You are too much children to realize what he's doing and why and I can't make you understand that."

Hermione bristled at being called a child and opened her mouth to fire off an angry retort.

Harry didn't let her. "As I mentioned earlier, Draco's confession falls under the category of 'hearsay' and he will most definitely deny it if Dumbledore asks him about it. Basically, all you can do is stalk him until you're satisfied he's innocent. As we've all realized that someone could order an attack in advance, having an alibi means nothing, so you're not going to let up until I catch him."

"Wait...you?" Neville asked.

"Of course," Harry grinned good-naturedly. "I've been told that I have a 'saving people thing.' And Professor Lockhart's assured me that the dramatic killing a Basilisk would be a riveting best-seller."

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty Two

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

After Ron, Hermione, and Neville had gone to bed, Harry stayed down in the Common Room, waiting for Sirius to call. Sure enough, after twenty minutes, his mirror flashed to indicate that Sirius was trying to reach him. He removed the silencing spell from the mirror and waited to see what his godfather had to say.

“You sent me a bloody mirror?” was the first thing out of Sirius’s mouth.

“Well, hello to you too, Sirius. I haven’t seen you since Halloween. I’m fine, thanks for asking. How have you been?” Harry asked politely.

“Don’t get cute with me Harry,” Sirius growled. “You sent me a mirror for Christmas!”

“Don’t get pissy with me Sirius,” Harry said, imitating Sirius’s indignant tone, “You really need it. When was the last time you shaved?”

“I’ve been on the run!”

“I got you a wand,” Harry pointed out.

“You made me look like an eleven-year-old girl first,” Sirius shot back.

Harry shrugged, trying valiantly to suppress his grin at that very interesting mental picture. “What can I say, Sirius? Sacrifices must be made.”

“I didn’t see you making any sacrifices...” Sirius said moodily.

“Au contraire, I am now scarred for life,” Harry insisted.

“You don’t look scarred,” Sirius countered as Harry lost the fight to keep his face impassive.

"Yeah, well..." Harry trailed off. "I thought I should probably warn you before I actually do it, but Mrs. Figg sent me one of her kneazle kittens and I'm having one of the school owls deliver it to Filch tomorrow at breakfast."

Sirius froze, mouth agape in horror. "Harry...you..." he shook his head, unable to continue.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Spare me the histrionics, please."

"What histrionics? I am genuinely horrified and appalled here," Sirius huffed indignantly. "What were those Muggles thinking when they raised you?"

"I sure wish we had a less active Child Protection Service so we could beat the magic out of our freak of a nephew'?" Harry suggested impishly.

"You know what I mean," Sirius said impatiently.

Harry nodded. "Indeed I do. That's why I answered your question to the best of my abilities."

"Don't play dumb Harry; it doesn't suit you," Sirius sniped.

"Hey, if you're going to be like that, then fine. Where's my Christmas present?" Harry demanded, crossing his arms. "You can't complain about what I got you and then turn around and not get me anything."

"I'm a fugitive of the law! I don't exactly have the resources to get you anything," Sirius said defensively.

"Bull," Harry said dismissively. "You have a wand, don't you?"

"Anything I can make with a wand, you can make," Sirius pointed out. "Given my little prison stint, you technically have more years of using magic on you than I do."

"Details, details," Harry waved his hand impatiently. "And what I meant was, you can use glamour and don't even pretend that the

goblins care that you're a fugitive. You could have easily gotten me something."

"Well, maybe I would have been more receptive if you'd agreed to meet up. I haven't seen you in months, after all," Sirius pouted.

"That's because, your fugitive status notwithstanding, I'm off at boarding school. That's kind of how these things work. You're just going to have to get used to that."

"I am used to it," Sirius muttered. "But you're the only other person who even understands what's going on with the future and about the Horcruxes and who knows that I'm innocent. I have to use a bloody glamour any time I go anywhere."

"Oh, so you can use a glamour to go places but not to buy me stuff? Typical. You are, without a doubt, the worst godfather ever," Harry declared dramatically.

"Hey, I ate rats for you," Sirius counted.

Harry made a face. "Damn, you've got me there. But seriously, Sirius – and so help me, don't you dare make another stupid pun about that, what I said was completely unintentional – I wanted to meet up but it just wouldn't be very feasible. We don't want there to be any chance of anyone seeing you. We couldn't even meet at the Shrieking Shack since you destroyed it," Harry told him.

"That was an accident!" Sirius protested.

"But it's still gone. And very symbolic, if you think about it. But anyway, you wouldn't even be on the run if you just agreed to–"

"We've been over this, Harry," Sirius interrupted. "It's just not happening. The only way I step foot in that godforsaken house again is if you drag my cold, dead corpse through the doorway."

"Isn't it a bit redundant to say 'cold' and 'dead'?" Harry asked. "Seeing as how they mean the same thing?"

"I know that; I'm just being thorough," Sirius assured him. "And besides, anything I can buy for you-"

"I know, I know," Harry said tiredly. "I can buy for myself. You're really not getting this whole 'Spirit of Christmas' thing, are you?"

"You spend twelve years in bloody Azkaban and we'll see just how much Christmas Spirit you have," Sirius countered.

"You had plenty of Christmas Spirit before you fell through the Veil," Harry pointed out.

"You fall through the Veil and—" Sirius paused. "Oh. Well maybe I'm just depressed because Remus still thinks I'm evil."

"You have me," Harry told him.

There was silence from Sirius's end.

"Sirius!"

"What?" Sirius asked innocently. "Of course I have you. Hm...how about, to make it up to you, I teach you how to be an animagus? As the only child of the Marauders—"

"Actually, Remus had a son, too," Harry interjected. "His name is Teddy."

Sirius looked a little put out. "Fine," he rallied. "Then as the first child of the Marauders, it is truly pathetic that you managed to go this long without becoming one."

"That's a nice sentiment," Harry said pleasantly. "But I had that mastered by the time I was twenty-one."

"Really?" Sirius asked, looking extremely excited. "What are you?"

Harry smirked. "Now, now, Sirius. That would be telling."

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"Hey, Draco, glad I caught you," Harry said, slapping the Slytherin in question on the back.

Draco eyed him warily. "Does this mean you're talking to me again?"

"Again? I never stopped talking to you," Harry assured him.

"Are you sure? Because I seem to recall you admitting you were avoiding me sometime in November," Draco said casually.

"Really, Draco, you do say the strangest things," Harry said, shaking his head. "Now why would I go and do a silly thing like that?"

"Avoid me?" Draco asked.

"Well, actually, I meant 'admit to avoiding you', but let's go with that. Why would I avoid you, Draco?" Harry asked, the epitome of innocence.

"Because you were spreading rumors about my parentage?" Draco suggested.

"There are rumors about your parentage?" Harry asked, looking shocked.

"Oh, come off it," Draco said, irritated. "I know you know. I know you started them."

"If you say so," Harry said, sounding dubious.

"What is it that you wanted?" Draco asked testily.

"I wanted to remind you to remind your father that after someone searches your property they cannot research it without a warrant and they cannot get that without what I like to call 'due cause.' I would like to further remind you that hearsay does not qualify nor does drugging several students, impersonating them, and overhearing any statements you may have made about your drawing room."

Draco just stared at him. "What?"

"Have a good day," Harry said cheerfully as he ran off, leaving Draco shaking his head in confusion and growing paranoia behind him.

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The next month and a half passed quite uneventfully. Only three people had been petrified (Zacharias Smith again, Randolph Burrow from Ravenclaw, and Cormac McLaggen, who Harry was even more tempted to leave petrified than he was Zacharias) and all had been quickly revived.

Despite the fact that Sirius called him on the mirror at least twice every week, Harry still refused to tell him what animagus form he had. He didn't really have a reason for it, although it was fun watching Sirius jump through hoops trying to analyze him and figure out what animal he was even though he thought it was painfully obvious. But then he'd had Hermione spend days analyzing why after he completed the transformation, so maybe that was why.

Valentine's Day he decided would be, without a doubt, one of the worst days of his life with Lockhart running the show and the looks some of the barely pubescent girls were giving him. It also made him feel something like a pervert because he was so much older than them, even though he didn't look it and wasn't actually doing anything to encourage their affections. Quite the contrary, he kept trying to reject them, but they kept misinterpreting that to mean he was 'playing hard to get.' Needless to say, Luna and Hermione were the only girls he felt completely comfortable around in the days preceding the fourteenth.

On Valentine's Day itself, Harry realized that he'd worked himself up into such a panic that he would probably snap and start hexing anyone coming within a five foot radius of him and decided, for everyone's sake, to just stay in bed. It wasn't like he was going to miss anything with all of those dwarfs and hormones floating around.

Harry was especially grateful that he chose to do this when the dwarves began a 15-hour siege on his fortunately fortified dormitory

door starting at nine that morning. After reinforcing the protections he'd cast and adding a couple of silencing spells, it really didn't bother him all day, although his roommates were a bit disturbed when they came back that evening. Apparently it was weird that he had an entire army full of determined message-deliverers. Determined, but clearly only within reason as they stopped the minute it hit midnight. Apparently dwarves don't do overtime.

In March, Harry and Luna attended the loud and raucous party the Mandrakes were throwing in Greenhouse Three and it honestly had to be one of the most bizarre experiences Harry ever had. Particularly since he could barely hear anything due to the spells he and Luna had cast on themselves so they wouldn't be knocked out and/or killed by their hosts. It certainly made for an interesting editorial, though, and some strange pictures. It struck Harry as slightly odd that the Mandrakes were almost fully matured, but nobody really seemed to care as Harry kept the supply of Mandrake Potion on coming whenever anybody needed it.

Before Harry knew it, it was time to choose the classes for third year. And despite what Hermione may have thought, Harry did think long and hard about his choices.

"You want to take Muggle Studies, Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination?" Hermione asked incredulously, glancing at his sheet.

"Yep," Harry nodded.

"I can't believe you," Hermione said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "You're taking them." He paused. "Among other things."

Hermione looked startled. "How did you know about-"

"You totally planning on using the Time Turner I got you to take not only those three subjects but Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, too?" Harry asked innocently.

Now Hermione looked outraged. “HARRY! That was supposed to be a secret! And how did you even know about that in the first place?”

Harry crossed his arms and said, not a little smugly, “That’s what you get for doubting my scar.”

Hermione looked bemused. “Are you saying your scar wants an apology or something?”

Harry cocked his head to the side, pretending to consult with said facial disfigurement. “My scar says that would be nice.”

Hermione raised her eyes to the heavens in a ‘why me’ gesture. “If I do, will you not tell anyone else?”

“You know, you guys can stop acting like we’re not here any time now,” Neville told them.

“Yeah, and we are perfectly capable of keeping secrets,” Ron added.

Harry ignored them. “I promise.” Another pause. “And so does my scar.”

“Even if I believed your scar could talk, you’re the only one who understands it!” Hermione exploded.

“You don’t know that,” Harry told her crossly.

“Still here...” Neville said.

“Who else can communicate with your scar then and why haven’t they come forward?” Hermione challenged.

“Well I’m sure I don’t know the answer to either question – I’m not my scar’s keeper after all,” Harry glared at Hermione, who had snorted at that. “But possibly it’s because they don’t want anyone to think they’re crazy.”

“Because why would anyone think that someone was crazy for hearing your scar talk to them?” Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Hey, do you want to just forget them and play Chess since they won't acknowledge us?" Ron asked.

"Why not?" Neville shrugged. "See how they like it."

"My scar is still waiting for that apology," Harry reminded her.

"Fine!" Hermione threw her hands up in the air. "I'm sorry if I offended your scar by implying that it is not sentient and as such cannot actually speak to anyone. And for thinking that even if it could, it still wouldn't be psychic because that is really pushing the limits of what I'm willing to believe, even in a magic school."

"My scar thanks you and, what's more, I thank you," Harry said gravely. "My scar really wouldn't shut up about how angry and hurt it was whenever you were in the room. I do have a question for you, though. If you don't believe anyone can be psychic, what's the point of taking Divination?"

"I may not believe in it, but I don't know for sure that it's not real and I'm anal enough that I can't stand the possibility of missing out on what might turn out to be a completely legitimate learning experience," Hermione answered promptly.

Harry laughed at that. "Hermione, regardless of your opinions of the validity of the art of Divination as a whole, even the most blatant frauds will tell you that you can't learn Divination. You either have the 'Inner Eye' or you don't."

"Are you saying I don't have this 'Inner Eye'?" Hermione asked, her voice dangerous. Clearly she didn't appreciate being told she wasn't good enough to take a class, even one she didn't particularly want to take but was taking more as a matter of principle.

"I'm just saying that if you did, you probably would have had some indication by now," Harry said delicately.

"Like with you and your scar?" Hermione sniffed.

"By that do you mean 'do I think I'll be good at the subject'?" Harry asked. "I think I'll be phenomenal." Partly because of his incredibly BS abilities. "But something you should know is that a common characteristic of Seers is that the stronger Inner Eye you possess, the more, well, strange you tend to be."

"So you WOULD be an expert," Hermione said innocently. "And probably Luna too. But does that mean that our Professor would also be a bit...distant?"

"Professor Trelawney has a very strong Inner Eye but she sometimes tries to...push it, force future knowledge that she needs to just let come naturally. I have no doubt that she'd have a lot more visions if she'd just let it come naturally," Harry confided.

"How would you come to that conclusion if she never has?" Hermione was intrigued.

"Because real Seers never remember their prophecies," Harry explained. "Some 'higher power' or whatever is speaking through them."

"Then how do you explain that you remember everything you see?" Hermione countered.

"Easy. I'm not psychic, my scar is," Harry said simply.

"Then how would you be good at Divination?" Hermione asked.

"I have 24-hour access to my scar, first of all. Secondly, when it comes to Divination class, a lot of the time you have to fake it, no matter how talented you are."

"Then why take the class, if you seem to be convinced it won't do you any good?" Hermione asked, baffled.

"Because it's an easy O, duh," Ron supplied, looking up from the chess board.

"Because I'd like an opportunity to further hone my BS abilities and it won't be that difficult," Harry said. "Am I right, Ron?"

Ron, who had just said something to that effect literally ten seconds before Harry remembered he existed, just gaped at him in horror.

Neville patted him on the arm sympathetically.

"Fine, don't answer me," Harry said, annoyed. "I don't care."

"Why would you want to do that when you can take something useful like Arithmancy or Ancient Runes?" Hermione demanded.

"Because I know nothing about either of those subjects and I would actually have to work at it and quite frankly I just don't feel like it," Harry replied.

"I can understand taking Care of Magical Creatures. That might not come into play with whatever you want to do once you graduate, but surely you will, at some point, encounter some magical creatures and it would help if you knew the basics when dealing with them. On the other hand, Muggle Studies?" Hermione couldn't believe it.

"Why not?" Harry said again. "You're taking it."

"I'm only taking it because I think it would be fascinating to study Muggles from a wizarding perspective," Hermione pointed out. "Since you won't even try something new, I think I can safely say that that's not your motivation. So why are you really taking it?"

"Even easier O." Hermione threw a book at him. "What?"

"You're impossible, you know that?" Hermione grumbled.

"But you love me anyway," Harry grinned.

"Only because you lured me into friendship under false pretences!" Hermione insisted.

Harry's eyebrows wrinkled in confusion. It wasn't often he was confused since his return to the past and he didn't like the feeling.
"False pretences?"

"You didn't tell me you were crazy!"

"That's because I'm not," Harry protested.

"Your scar says otherwise," Hermione responded.

"Oh, so NOW you can hear my scar. By your own logic, that makes you crazy," Harry shot back.

"I think they're both crazy," Ron offered.

"For once, I agree," Neville said.

"Why are they ignoring us again?" Ron asked, still a little offended.

"I don't think they're doing it on purpose. I just think that they're both the type of people who get so caught up in arguments they just don't notice anything outside of what they're saying," Neville suggested.

"Really? That's so weird..."

Neville shrugged. "You and Hermione are the same way, you know."

Ron's eyes bulged out. "Really?!?!"

Neville nodded, thinking back on all the times Harry had been off doing God knows what and he had been left alone with a bickering Ron and Hermione and thoroughly ignored. Was it any wonder, really, he reached out to Ginny? Growing up with six older brothers, she understood perfectly.

Review, Please!

Chapter Twenty Three

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Sorry for the delay in updating, but I've had the bad luck to be sick, flooded with homework, have several field trips, and just in general being very busy lately. Of course, May will be even worse with graduation...

Harry, Ron, Neville, and Hermione traipsed down to see Hagrid after Harry (and team. But mostly Harry) had flattened Hufflepuff 400 to 230. It had been a long game, but then that was what Harry got for having the worst broom in the game when everyone else was on equal footing. Still, the look on Cedric's face when Harry swooped in and grabbed the Snitch from right behind Cedric's ear – where it had been for at least five minutes that Harry was aware of, it was like the Snitch was stalking the older boy or something.

"Hi, Hagrid," Harry greeted. "Did you see the game? Or, more specifically, did you see the way I totally trounced Cedric despite the fact that my broom really doesn't hold a candle to his?"

"O' course," Hagrid assured him. "Wouldn' miss it for the world."

"Oh please," Hermione said, annoyance clear on her face. "He has a Nimbus 2001. You have a Nimbus 2000. The two brooms came out within a year of each other. How much of a difference can there possibly be?"

The other four did not dignify that question with a response.

"Men," Hermione huffed.

"Right, because that's not sexist at all, Hermione," Neville said, rolling his eyes.

"What's the real reason you didn't get a Nimbus 2001, Harry?" Ron took the opportunity to ask.

"I'm holding out to make my godfather buy me a Firebolt next year," Harry confided.

Ron's brow wrinkled in confusion. "But isn't your godfather—"

"Yes," Harry said shortly. "Which is why he totally owes me years worth of Christmas presents. Honestly, he didn't even get me anything this year."

"But he's a mass murderer! And on the run!" Ron pointed out.

"What's this?" Hermione looked startled.

"How do you know abou' Black?" Hagrid demanded.

"Oh look, Fudge!" Harry said, for once glad to see the man. He was SO not looking forward to having this conversation a full year early. Or at all, for that matter.

"Where?" Ron asked eagerly. Harry wondered briefly why in the world he was so excited to see the rather incompetent and extremely pompous Minister of Magic and then he realized that Ron had completely misunderstood what he said because he was, as per usual, thinking with his stomach.

"Trust me, you probably don't want any if Hagrid made it," Neville whispered to him, too low for Hagrid to hear. "Did you mean food, Harry?"

"No, I meant the Minister of Magic," Harry explained.

Hermione sighed, obviously not believing him but deciding to humor him anyway. "Why would the Minister of Magic be outside of Hagrid's hut?" she asked patiently.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I don't know. It better not be what I think it is, though."

"Do yeh think they found out abou' the attacks?" Hagrid asked nervously.

"There's no proof," Harry was quick to reassure him. "Even if they did hear something, with our unpetrifaction rate, there's nothing to see and thus nothing they can do."

"But why would they come after Hagrid?" Hermione was puzzled but thinking hard.

"Because they're all a bunch of morons," Harry said simply. "What do you expect?"

Hagrid shot Harry a grateful look as there was a loud knock on the door.

"You four, hide," Hagrid advised.

Everyone looked at Harry.

"What makes you think I even have my Invisibility Cloak?" he asked.

"You always have your Invisibility Cloak," Neville replied calmly.

"So what if I do?" Harry asked, crossing his arms defiantly. "It's not curfew for a good twenty minutes or so; we have every right to be here."

Hagrid looked unsure for a moment before shrugging and said, "Suit yerself."

"Good evening, Hagrid," Professor Dumbledore greeted him once the door was finally opened. "And...guests." He didn't really sound all that surprised to find Harry and his posse there.

"Bad business, Hagrid," Fudge said curtly. "Very bad business. If it's true, well...We just can't take that risk. You under-What are you doing here?" he asked once he spotted the students.

"We're visiting our dear friend Hagrid and having a nice conversation about how great it is that there isn't a basilisk loose at school this

year because, quite frankly, that would suck," Harry lied, smiling brightly.

"There...isn't?" Fudge looked confused. He turned to the man standing behind him. "But you said-"

"Of course there's a basilisk loose in the school," Lucius Malfoy interjected smoothly. "Draco wouldn't lie about a thing like that. Now, I don't know who you think you are, but I assure you that-Potter." The last part was said very flat and emotionless. Honestly, it was almost like Lucius had finally figured out the scandal Harry had caused for his family. Still, the fact that Lucius hadn't so much as twitched for his wand made him somewhat doubt that.

"Potter?" Fudge peered closely at Harry. "As in Harry Potter? I could have sworn you were Dra-" he trailed off as he glanced at his number one campaign contributor. "Er, never mind."

"Why does everyone keep doing that?" Lucius asked idly.

"Did you guys have a point in being here?" Harry asked, not so much because he wanted to know or get the conversation moving but because he fully appreciated how easily people could get sidetracked and knew no one else would be rude enough to bring them back to the matter at hand.

Lucius threw him an annoyed glance, because Fudge was far too inclined to kiss his ass to do so himself. "Of course there is. We're here to stop the attacks."

"What attacks? I haven't heard anything about any attacks. Did you guys here anything?" Harry turned to his friends.

"Nope," Ron said immediately.

"Not a thing," Neville concurred.

"Was anyone hurt?" Hermione asked, rather than outright lying to an authority figure.

Fudge looked a little embarrassed. "Well...no. But basilisks are Serious Business."

"So they are," Harry agreed, looking appropriately puzzled. "What attacks are you talking about, sir?" God, calling Fudge 'sir' was bloody nauseating.

"There is a basilisk running loose in this school and you all are covering it up," Lucius accused, sounding impatient.

"Why on Earth would we do that, Lucius?" Dumbledore spoke up. "As Cornelius said, basilisks are very dangerous and if something was going around killing or – at the very least – petrifying students, how could we possibly hide that? We're not monitoring communications and you can ask some of the students if you require further reassurance."

"As much faith as we have in you, Dumbledore," Lucius said, looking for all the world as if those words pained him to say, "my son, who has my complete confidence, has insisted that–"

"I'm sure he has," Harry interrupted. "But if that were true, then why hasn't anybody else said anything? Or do you honestly think that people are more afraid of 'getting in trouble' for telling than of a giant bloody snake?"

"Are you calling my son a liar?" Lucius demanded.

"Of course not," Harry replied, shocked. He never was one to be the pot calling the kettle black, after all. "In fact, Draco's a friend of mine. I'm the one who gave him that advice about illegal search and seizure, you know. But I would also like to point out that Draco is also claiming to be the Heir of Slytherin, so perhaps that's why he's talking about a basilisk."

"My son wouldn't—" Lucius began, angrily.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Ron waited until Lucius looked over at him. "Your son is twelve."

Lucius flushed angrily and Ron looked quite pleased of himself.

"Regardless of the, er, validity of these claims," Fudge, who was looking disappointed at the turn of events that didn't appear to be leading to him getting to arrest Hagrid and making Lucius happy, began. "The fact remains that claims have been made, and from a reliable source from a good family. Therefore, investigations must be made."

"By all means," Dumbledore said magnanimously. "Would you care to accompany us, Hagrid? I think it's time the four of you got back to your Common Room anyway."

The eight of them made their way back to the castle in a variety of spirits. Hagrid was jumpy, as if Fudge might arrest him at any moment. Hermione was in awe of meeting the most powerful (at least nominally) wizard in Britain. Ron was still pleased he had gotten the best of the father of his mortal enemy. Lucius was glowering at everyone but Neville and Hermione – Neville because he was from a nice, respectable Pureblood family and Hermione because he honestly had no idea who she was or why he should hate her. Fudge was looking unsettled as he was beginning to realize that he was caught in the middle of a power struggle between two of the wizards he depended upon the most. Neville looked like he'd rather be doing something less dramatic and Harry was staring up at the stars and trying to do some last-minute studying for that Astronomy test he was going to have at Midnight.

Of course, almost the second they stepped foot into the Castle, Miss Amaretto – Filch's reasoning behind naming his new cat after an Italian liquor was beyond Harry's comprehension – spotted them and, sure enough, Filch quickly accosted them.

"There you are," he growled at Harry. "Everyone's been looking for you. There's been another one."

"Another...what, exactly?" Lucius asked, looking disdainfully at the Squib caretaker.

Clearly remembering and disliking Lucius from his own days as a student, Filch took a moment before answering. “Another pair of students hexing each other in the hallway. Said they were after a rogue pixie.”

Hogwarts being what it was, no one bothered to question what a rogue pixie would be doing there or why students felt the need to curse it.

Filch turned to Harry. “They’re asking for you.”

Harry nodded solemnly. “Right. I have to go help them spin this so they don’t look like morons at breakfast tomorrow when the whole school’s heard about it.” With that, he took off running down the hallway.

“Wipe your feet!” Filch called after him.

“Be careful running in the hallways,” Dumbledore added mildly.

“Wait, we should probably go to the Hospital Wing, too,” Fudge suggested as Harry exited hearing range.

Quickly arriving at the Hospital Wing, Harry automatically pulled out two Polyjuice Potions and thrust them into Madam Pomfrey’s outstretched hand.

Madam Pomfrey stared at them inquisitively. “Is this...Polyjuice Potion?”

“Er, maybe?” he replied, he caught his breath. “Here,” he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out two vials of Mandrake Draught (apparently it was Mandrake Draught and not Mandrake Potion. Who knew? Well, other than Neville and Hermione, who had given him a fifteen-minute lecture on the subject) this time.

“Why were you even carrying Polyjuice Potion around with you anyway?” Madam Pomfrey asked suspiciously. “And is it even legal here at Hogwarts?”

"I'm pretty sure that nobody bothered to ban it due to its expense, difficulty in making, and overall rarity. But never mind that: who got petrified this time?" he asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"Draco Malfoy and Cedric Diggory," came the terse response.

Harry laughed. "Now that is too funny."

Madam Pomfrey raised an eyebrow at him. "How is that funny? I thought both of these boys were friends of yours."

"Oh, they are," Harry agreed. "That's not what's funny. What's funny is...well, first off, what were they even doing together in the first place? I wasn't even aware that they knew each other."

"I'm sure I don't know," answered the nurse dryly. "They were POA."

"POA?" Harry repeated. The only thing he could think of that those three letters could mean was 'Prisoner of Azkaban' but he somehow doubted that was the case here.

" 'Petrified on Arrival', " she explained with a slight smile.

"I see. And what I was saying was that Draco's father and Minister Fudge are here in the castle this very moment looking for evidence to back up Draco's claims that people are getting petrified left and right and Draco chooses now to go and get himself petrified."

"Because I'm sure that's exactly what he was planning when he got attacked," Madam Pomfrey said sarcastically.

Harry shrugged. "Hey, you never know. Fortunately, the Mandrake Draught is going to take effect any second now...right?" he asked as he heard footsteps outside the door.

Madam Pomfrey glanced worriedly at her patients. "It should."

Just as the door to the Hospital Wing swung open, Draco and Cedric were blinking sleepily.

“Dad?” Draco asked confused. He quickly realized that there were other people in the room. At some point, however, Harry’s friends had clearly been sent back to the Common Room. “I mean, Father? What are you doing here?”

“I think the more appropriate question is: What are you doing here?” Lucius asked, a little concern inadvertently slipping into his voice.

“I was...I was...” Draco paused, trying to remember.

“Pixie,” Harry coughed.

Cedric, thankfully, got Harry’s meaning instantly. “We were comparing Seeker strategies in the hallway when all of a sudden this little blue Pixie comes out of nowhere and starts attacking us. Neither of us could think of a Pixie banishing charm off the top of our heads so we tried to freeze it, but it kept moving so we missed and hit each other,” he told them, sounding very responsible and convincing. No wonder he was a Prefect. Was he Head Boy as well? Harry couldn’t remember.

“Is that true, Draco?” Lucius turned a critical eye to his son.

Still looking a bit out of it, Draco looked from his father to Harry indecisively. “I...yes,” he finally said.

“Are these two your only patients, Madam Pomfrey?” Dumbledore asked polite as ever.

“Aside from a fourth year who managed to turn her ears into carrots, yes, they are,” the nurse confirmed.

“You don’t mind if we make sure of that, do you?” Fudge asked, walking further into the room. He soon found his path blocked by an irate school nurse, however.

“Minister, I hope you’re not suggesting that you think I am hiding patients,” she began heatedly, advancing on him menacingly.

“No, I-” Fudge tried to defend himself, but she was having none of it.

"Of course, if I was going to hide them, it certainly wouldn't be in the Hospital Wing, now would it? Why don't you go check for them in a broom closet? Or on the roof?" she suggested icily.

"I believe you, I believe you," Fudge insisted, quickly retreating.

"Thank you," she said. "Now, if you don't mind, you're disturbing my patients."

With that, they had no choice but to leave. Faced with absolutely no evidence of petrifaction or really anything out of the ordinary going on (save, perhaps, the freakishly empty Hospital Wing), Fudge and Lucius were forced to leave as well, extremely embarrassed for making so much commotion over something that everyone else was pretending wasn't happening. Harry idly wondered what would happen when the truth came out – and it would come out, as per his deal with Lockhart – but realized that as a Second Year, it really didn't matter to him one way or the other what happened or how it looked for the school because he was technically too young to be expected to deal with that.

As a second year, it was fully understandable why he started screaming the minute Hagrid slipped them that cryptic 'Follow the Spiders' advice that would never, ever lead to anything good. It was actually a good thing that Lucius and Fudge had already left. After all, it wouldn't due to get people questioning his sanity any sooner than they had to.

--
"Dear Merlin, this basilisk is a menace!" Draco was heard complaining during their next Potions class.

"Does that mean that you've renounced your evil ways as Heir of Slytherin?" Harry asked innocently.

Draco shot him a withering look. "That isn't funny, Potter."

"Oh, I know it isn't," Harry said, trying to placate him as Draco only ever called him Potter when he was really annoyed. "It's just that, half the class genuinely believes you to be the Heir of Slytherin and therefore really want an answer to that question."

Draco stared at Harry. "You're serious?"

"No, I'm Harry," Harry said before he could stop himself.

Draco looked at him quizzically. "What-"

"Never mind, moral obligation, you wouldn't understand," Harry said dismissively. "So, once and for all, since you totally got petrified: Are you or are you not the Heir of Slytherin?"

Having been subject to Harry's 'no you ARE' or 'no you AREN'T' line of questioning that he got from the movie "Clue", Draco wisely chose to reply in a fuller manner. "I am not the Heir of Slytherin."

"If Harry can still be the Heir even when he has an alibi, then surely Malfoy can have the basilisk attack himself," Ron objected.

"Ron, shut up," Hermione elbowed Ron hard; she obviously understood how pointing out that Harry could still technically be the Heir was not, under any circumstances, a good plan.

"What do we have here?" Snape asked silkily, coming up behind them.

"They are arguing about whether or not Malfoy's being petrified rules him out as Heir of Slytherin and if Harry having an alibi could still make him a candidate after all," Neville supplied helpfully.

"I see," Snape's lip curled mockingly. "And after the Minister of Magic himself came down to investigate those nasty rumors about a basilisk loose in the school and was assured that they were, in fact, nothing more than nasty rumors."

"Well, we both know that neither one of us is the Heir, so our argument is really more for the sake of the rumor mill anyway," Harry offered.

"Why aren't you working, Potter?" Snape demanded.

"Because I can't multi-task to save my life when it comes to Potions. I swear, I look up for a second and something explodes." Harry paused and tilted his head. "Of course, that could be because the Slytherins keep throwing things in my cauldron to test if I'm 'worthy of associating with them' by surviving their periodic murder attempts. Seems kind of strange to me, but then, what do I know? I'm not a Slytherin."

"But you could have been," Snape muttered absently as he moved down the line to check someone else's cauldron. "Oh, you could have been."

Note: God, I hate writing Madam Pomfrey. In addition to wanting to spell her name with a 'ph' instead of an 'f', I also keep adding an 'e' to the end of Madam. Very annoying.

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty Four

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Okay, last chapter there was some confusion about why Draco was willing to lie to his father when Lucius was only at Hogwarts on Draco's information. Draco didn't actually tell Lucius anything; Lucius knew that there should be attacks going on since he slipped Ginny the Diary and has no idea why he hasn't heard anything about them. He knew that the Diary would open the Chamber of Secrets but didn't know that the monster was a basilisk until Harry mentioned it in Hagrid's hut. Draco was willing to lie to his father because he knew that there wasn't any proof of the Chamber opening and even if they were willing to wait around for another attack, Harry and co. could just cover it up, like they did with him and Cedric. As a Slytherin, Draco realizes that if he came clean, he would be the only one who would and so his testimony wouldn't be enough to go on (particularly as he kept claiming to be the Heir himself) and everyone would be mad at him for getting the Ministry involved in Hogwarts, as nothing good ever comes from their interference. Ever.

A week before finals, Pettigrew was still on the loose, annoying everyone greatly by having petrified everyone at least once (except Harry, who he seemed to be avoiding) and occasionally leaving graffiti messages around the school, warning people about the 'Heir'. These messages only served to irritate Filch, however, which in turn served to irritate everyone else because, really, who likes a cantankerous caretaker on the warpath? And Filch certainly seemed to take every painted message as a personal affront.

Harry was just on his way back from another grueling session of refusing to study for finals like everyone else and was feeling quite pleased that he'd managed to run away from the library the minute Hermione's back was turned. He glanced at the wall idly as he noticed there was a new message and then froze.

Their skeletons will lie in the Chamber forever.

Their? As in, more than one person he'd have to go rescue now? Harry groaned. He hated multi-people rescues. After all, the more

people the more complaints he got for not doing it heroically enough and the more suspicions about how he somehow knew exactly what to do. Fortunately, he appeared to be the first one to have seen this new threat, or one of the first, anyway, as a lockdown hadn't been initiated yet. That gave him a little time.

He headed immediately to Lockhart's office.

"Professor, do you still have that rooster I sto-er, borrowed from Hagrid?" Harry demanded, barging right in and hoping Lockhart didn't have company.

Fortunately, Lockhart was alone. "Of course I do; you said it would allow us to slay the basilisk without actually risking our lives."

"Without unduly risking our lives," Harry corrected. "We are still dealing with a basilisk here and that is always very dangerous. On the other hand, we've lasted seven months with it running around and petrifying people every time we turn around, so we should be fine."

Lockhart nodded. "I've been petrified four times already; what's one more?"

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "Now, apparently at least two people have been taken down to the Chamber, possibly more. This means that that stupid Diary will also be down there and the students were taken hostage to lure me down there. I seem to have a reputation as a saving-people person," he explained.

"You don't say," Lockhart said dryly.

"Now, no matter what happens down there, I need you to stick to the plan. Things are probably going to get a little weird and chances are the perpetrator is really crazy. Just act like you know what you're doing, let me taunt them a little, and then the minute it looks like the basilisk is going to make an appearance, get the rooster to crow. I can take care of everything else," Harry said, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak.

"This looks valuable," Lockhart said, fingering the material longingly.

"It is," Harry said grimly. "It's also an heirloom, so don't even think about it. Besides, I have two dozen people who can vouch that I do, in fact, own this and I'm not telling you who, so you wouldn't be able to get them all. Now get under it so we can go."

"Fine..." Lockhart sighed, looking disappointed but doing as Harry asked.

They silently proceeded to Myrtle's bathroom and pointedly ignored Dumbledore's announcement that everyone was to return to their Common Rooms. Once they had arrived, Harry went straight to the sinks to search for the serpent scratched on the surface of one of them while Lockhart talked Myrtle into letting him autograph her stall. Harry was really starting to wonder if it was actually possible for his vain professor to go longer than twenty minutes without feeling the need to sign something.

"Hey, I found it," Harry called out. "Open."

Lockhart came over and peered into the darkness uncertainly. "Please tell me you can make stairs appear."

"How could I possibly make stairs appear?" Harry asked logically. "I don't have a bloody manual, you know. Besides, if there were stairs to be had, why in the world wouldn't they be here already? The fact you need to speak Parseltongue to get this far should mean that Slytherin wouldn't bother to make the stairs only appear if you ask for them. He's supposed to be more sensible than Gryffindor, after all."

"If you say so...But really, what's down there? We have no way of knowing how far down it is and it's probably filthy." Lockhart wrinkled his nose at the thought.

Harry sighed. Seriously, they had bigger problems than sanitation right now. Like the two-possibly-more hostages down in the Chamber with Pettigrew and Voldemort's Horcrux. "Tell you what," he said finally. "You jump down and I'll cast a cushioning charm to soften the fall."

"That won't help with whatever dirt or grime that has got to be down there after a thousand years or so," Lockhart pointed out.

"Well that's the best you're going to get, so I suggest you take it," Harry growled. God, this was taking longer than just threatening him, as he and Ron had done last time.

"But I have to look my best for when we're done with this and return triumphantly to Dumbledore and the Media," Lockhart protested.

"The grime will add authenticity," Harry shot back.

"But-"

"Just go," Harry said, shoving him down into the darkness and casting a quick cushioning charm, like he promised. "That does remind me, though." He took out his mirror. "Oi, Sirius."

"What?" Sirius asked. Harry could barely hear him as the sound of laughter and music was loud in the background.

"I-Where are you?" Harry asked, listening to the voices going on around his errant godfather. "I don't recognize the accents."

"That's because I'm in Vegas," Sirius explained as if it were obvious.

"Vegas? You're in America?" Harry sputtered. "What are you doing there?"

"Gambling," Sirius said patiently. "Well, that and...but you're really too young for that."

"I'm twenty-four," Harry said irritably, crossing his arms.

"Exactly, far too young," Sirius agreed. "I, however, am thirty-seven, since we seem to be counting both timelines, and that's plenty old enough."

"Sirius, you...you know what, never mind," Harry said, shaking his head. "Listen, I need you to send a message to the Daily Prophet that two students were taken to the Chamber of Secrets."

Sirius blinked. "Any particular reason?"

"You mean other than the fact that fact that at least two students were taken to the Chamber of Secrets?" Harry asked innocently.

"Frankly, yes. You've been working all year to keep this quiet, remember? Why do you want to blow all that now?"

"Because everything is coming to a head and I want proof when I capture Pettigrew," Harry told him.

"You think you'll manage that?" Sirius asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"I'd better," Harry said fiercely. "But listen, I've got to go. I left Lockhart alone down there and if I don't hurry up he'll probably wander off, somehow manage to annoy Voldemort's Horcrux, and get himself killed."

"Just so we're clear: that would be a bad thing?" Sirius asked innocently.

"Of course it would be; a death on my watch would be a huge blow for my reputation as resident hero!" Harry exclaimed. "Bye." Harry turned around to see Myrtle staring at him. "What?"

"You have issues," she told him seriously.

Harry rolled his eyes as he took out his Nimbus 2000 and unshrunk it. Maybe it wasn't technically fair that he made Lockhart jump down when he had a broom the whole time, but really, Lockhart really should have been more prepared. Not to mention that Harry wasn't sure that Lockhart even COULD fly. After all, if he could, then he probably would carry a broom around with him at all times just so he could escape any situation if need be, seeing as how he was a dreadful coward.

When Harry landed besides Lockhart, the professor was dusting his robes off and trying vainly to look presentable. “You had a BROOM the whole time?” At Harry’s nod, he shot Harry a murderous look and started off down the tunnel.

“Sorry,” Harry offered half-heartedly as he ran to catch up with him. “Lumos.”

When they finally reached the main Chamber, a very different sight greeted them than last time. Instead of Ginny lying on the floor by the statue of Slytherin, Pettigrew lay prone.

“Do you think there’s any point in stunning him?” Harry wondered aloud.

“I really don’t think you need to bother,” Lockhart said, peering over at Pettigrew. “He doesn’t look like he’s going to be going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry agreed reluctantly. “On the other hand, he is insanely good at evading capture.”

“Wow, he can elude a preteen, he must be a criminal mastermind,” Lockhart muttered, still obviously sore about Harry letting him get dirty when he technically didn’t need to.

“You know, I only had the one broom,” Harry said defensively. “And it’s not like I even knew that today would be the day until I saw the writing on the wall.”

Lockhart studiously pretended not to hear him, deciding instead to risk entering the room further.

“Harry!”

Harry’s head shot in the direction of the voice. “Ginny? What are you doing here? Oh, hi Luna.” Somehow it was less jarring to see Luna in the Chamber than Ginny, although Harry wasn’t sure if that was because of Luna’s penchant for getting into strange situations or

because the odds of Ginny getting taken down to the Chamber AGAIN was astronomically small.

"We were just on our way back from visiting the Thestrals when a short bald man ambushed us, muttering something about how he's getting too old for this and felt vaguely like a pervert for kidnapping two young girls and then I think he stunned us because we just woke up a couple of minutes ago," Luna explained.

"For the record, I am never going to go visit the Thestrals with you ever again," Ginny said decisively.

"That's hardly fair," Luna objected. "He seemed to be waiting for you and took me just because I was there; if anything I should be the one who doesn't want to spend time with you anymore."

"It's not because of the kidnapping, Luna," Ginny sighed. "It's just that I can't actually see your creepy zombie horses and so going there and watching you pet them and feed them raw steak and seeing it get ripped apart by creatures I can't see is just kind of weird and not really my thing."

"Oh." Luna paused for a second. "You could always watch somebody die," she suggested.

"Luna!" Ginny exclaimed scandalized. "I can't do that!"

"Why not?" Luna asked reasonably. "Just go to St. Mungo's and ask them for help. People are always dying there."

"That's not a very good recommendation for a magical hospital," Harry interjected.

Luna just shrugged. "The more you know about magic, the less you tend to know about medicine, so it's great for injuries, but if you ever have any illnesses - particularly Muggle ones – you're out of luck. But of course, the more you know about magic, the less you tend to respect Muggle treatments."

"That is really depressing," Harry said flatly.

Another shrug. "It's the atmosphere."

"He won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry looked over to see Lockhart nudging Pettigrew gingerly with his foot.

"I don't really care if he wakes up; I just need him alive," Harry replied. "Come to think of it, I don't even need him alive, do I? I just need him nice and unexploded."

"I'm fairly sure he's still alive," Lockhart called out helpfully.

"Yes, he is," Tom Riddle agreed. "For now."

"Why in the world are you killing the one guy stupid enough to follow you even when you're nothing but a disembodied spirit? And you're not even that, are you? You're just a Diary filled with plenty of teenage angst."

Riddle glared at Harry but didn't respond, instead twirling Lockhart's wand between his fingers. Why in the world had Lockhart set that down? This was going to make it harder. Although, on the bright side, it wasn't a compatible wand so Riddle wouldn't be able to use it as effectively as he'd used Harry's.

"I do hope you plan on taking me seriously, Harry Potter," Riddle said. "Wormtail told me you don't do that often, but I've waited a long time for this, for the chance to see you, speak to you."

"If you want to know how I survived the Killing Curse, the answer is 'none of your business'," Harry replied politely.

"I don't think you quite understand," Riddle said slowly. "I am going to kill you. That is inevitable and nothing you can do will change that. Wormtail will also die. I need his life-force to bring myself into reality. Those two young girls, however, don't have to die. I will kill them, though, and slowly, if you do not give me the information I need."

"If you're planning on killing me anyway, then what's it matter how I survived the Killing Curse? Just use a different spell," Harry suggested, eyeing the wand in Riddle's hand warily and wondering if perhaps it wasn't the best idea to goad Voldemort's young self to kill him.

"Do you have any idea how boring it was, having to listen to the silly little troubles of such a silly little man? He'd been writing in the Diary for months, telling me all his pitiful worries and woes: how Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban and was going to kill him, how he might convince Remus Lupin of the truth about what happened to the Potters, how he couldn't even reveal himself to be alive without proving a traitor, how every one of my follower's would see him dead leading to my downfall, how no matter what he tried, he just couldn't get that basilisk to kill someone."

"Well, I'm sorry you were bored," Harry deadpanned. "Though, seriously, if that's the worse inconvenience you had, you're pretty lucky. Last year, you had to put up with stuttering. All year. I swear, it was giving me migraines and I only ever saw Quirrell during class." He paused. "The headaches might have actually had something to do with the face you were on the back of his head, but let's not quibble."

"Why won't you take me seriously?" Riddle demanded, wand-arm twitching.

"Because you're a bastion of teenage angst," Harry said simply. "I already said that. On the other hand, a basilisk, now THAT'S serious. I might even go so far as to say it is frightening. Of course, if you're not going to summon it and just want to have a nice chat, then I can work with that, too. It will involve a lot more sarcasm and questioning just how badass a person is if they write in a Diary."

"I become the most feared wizard of all time!" Riddle retorted. "And I'm a bloody mass murderer!"

"I'll give you the mass murderer thing," Harry said. "But the whole effect is ruined by the fact that you keep a Diary. I mean, honestly, what's with that? It's like 'Dear Diary, today I went and slaughtered an entire village of Muggles. Aren't I diabolical? And no, I am in no way

compensating for the fact that my father abandoned my mother before I was born. And no, said father was not a Muggle, where are these dreadful accusations coming from? They are distinctly not fabulous.”

“Stop that,” Riddle ordered, his face red with fury.

“And as for the whole ‘most feared wizard of all time’ thing, there’s just no way. I mean, seriously. You may terrify everyone now, but that’s just a generational thing. Before you, everyone was scared of Grindelwald and God knows there were countless before him. And everyone knows Dumbledore is more well-respected than you anyway.”

“I was going to let your little girlfriends live, Potter, but you’ve pushed me too far. Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four,” Riddle hissed.

“Wow, he had a huge ego. I wonder if he had to say that when he was visiting the Chamber,” Harry mused.

“Is it time, yet?” Lockhart whispered, coming to stand beside Harry.

“Almost,” Harry said quietly. “Close your eyes and I’ll tell you when. Hey, Luna, Ginny, you guys better close your eyes, too. Even if you only get petrified, now’s really not the best time for that.”

Harry waited until he heard Riddle his, “Kill them. Kill them all.”

“Now,” he breathed.

A few moments later, he heard unmistakable sound of a rooster crowing and a loud thump as something heavy hit the floor. Harry chanced a look through his mirror and saw that the basilisk was dead. Fortunately, its eyes were also closed, so Harry wasn’t even petrified. Did basilisks eyes kill and/or petrify when they were dead? Harry was glad he didn’t have to find out. And come to think of it, why in the world was meeting a basilisk’s gaze such a dangerous thing to do in the first place? He’d have to remember to ask Hermione. Or, if she

didn't know, Dumbledore. Or maybe Hagrid. Surely someone, somewhere, would have an answer for him.

"NO!" Riddle cried, interrupting his musing, and, for some reason, still speaking in Parseltongue. "You will pay for this, you—"

"Oh give it up, already," Harry said, annoyed. He turned to Lockhart. "Did you grab the Diary?"

Lockhart nodded. "Of course," he said, handing it over.

"Excellent," Harry beamed, putting on some dragon-hide gloves and feeling quite fortunate he had had Potions earlier that day. "Accio basilisk fang."

"What are you doing?" Riddle demanded, abruptly switching over to English.

"I'm destroying your Diary," Harry told him bluntly as he caught the fang.

"But...you can't!" Riddle protested desperately, moving towards them.

"You're too old for these things and given you're status as self-proclaimed 'scariest wizard ever', it's quite frankly embarrassing that you still have this. It's for your own good, really," Harry said mockingly as he drove the fang through the Diary.

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty Five

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: So Ginny finally has some lines, and all she can think of to do is complain about the rescue. At least she's not being starstruck anymore, though. Probably because Harry didn't live up to her ideas about a romantic hero very well in his rather anti-climatic battle scene. Also, it continues to amaze me how many people read about Hermione getting a copy of Hogwarts: A History for Christmas in Chapter Six and remember it enough to be confused when she tries to check it out in Chapter Fifteen.

"Are you guys okay?" Harry asked, turning to face his three companions.

"I believe so," Luna answered him, eyeing Ginny and Lockhart carefully. "But Norbert isn't." She bent down to pick up the Crumple-Horned Snorkack creature Harry had gotten her for Christmas and showed the stiff little pig-like creature to him.

"Is it okay?" Harry asked, concerned. He didn't even want to think about how difficult replacing Norbert might be.

Luna poked it experimentally. "I think it's just petrified. Do you have any Mandrake Draught with you?"

"How did it get petrified?" Harry asked, reaching into his cloak and pull out a vial to hand to Luna.

"I would guess that it looked into the mirror Ginny put on the floor," Luna said.

"Why in the world did you put a mirror on the floor?" Harry questioned.

Ginny flushed. "Oh, well, I was worried I might be tempted to watch the heroic fight and I didn't want to get myself killed so I put my mirror down so if I accidentally saw the basilisk's eyes I'd be fine."

"You know, it's a sad day when getting petrified is widely regarded to be 'fine'..." Harry mused.

"Speaking of, Norbert was fine and now he's even better," Luna exclaimed brightly, watching Norbert wake up.

"I've got to tell you, Luna, I was pretty surprised when you continued to print things about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks in the Quibbler now that everyone knows that they exist," Harry said conversationally, waiting for the Draught to take effect.

"Well, Daddy and I had a long conversation about that and we eventually came to the conclusion that even though we no longer need to fight for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack's right for people to know it exists, it is still a very recently discovered species that little is known about, so there's still a story there. Besides, Norbert's adorable and so we've made him our official mascot. A regular Quibbler success story about the power of the press overcoming wide-spread ignorance, if you will," Luna explained proudly.

"Good for you, Luna," Harry said, genuinely happy for her.

"Of course," Ginny continued, completely ignoring the discussion about Norbert. "That was before I knew that the 'heroic fight' would basically just consist of you guys cheating and using a rooster."

"Hey," Lockhart began heatedly. "To the best of my knowledge, there aren't any 'rules' for killing basilisks. And even if there were, you should just be grateful that we saved you and not disappointed that we didn't fulfill your preteen fantasies of heroic behavior."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Of course Harry saved us; Harry always saves everyone."

Lockhart looked over at Harry approvingly. "That whole being personally called upon every time anyone was petrified all year thing really worked out well for you, didn't it?"

"When that guy kidnapped us, I thought 'well this sucks, but at least now I'll have a great story to tell people after Harry rescues me' but

nooooooo. My story will have to be 'Harry heroically let the basilisk get within 200 feet of him and then sicked a rooster on it, killing it instantly,'" Ginny huffed, clearly very put out that nothing good was coming out of her kidnapping.

Harry and Lockhart exchanged glances.

"You do know that that's not what we're going to tell people, right?" Harry asked hesitantly.

Ginny blinked at him. "But...that's what happened," she said, as if that had anything to do with it.

"For now," Lockhart agreed. "But really, stories like that just don't sell books. We'll need to come up with something else."

"You're going to be writing a book on this?" Ginny asked, disbelief evident in her voice. "But...nothing happened!"

"On the contrary, we killed a basilisk," Harry corrected. "We just didn't do it in a very exciting way. You know what would be exciting, though? Professor Lockhart managing to gouge out the basilisk's eyes before it bit him in the shoulder and I took advantage of the distraction to heroically slay the basilisk with the sword of Gryffindor."

"But that's not what happened!" Ginny really seemed stuck on this one point.

"But there's really no proof one way or another," Lockhart pointed out. "We'll have to stab the eyes of the basilisk so that it lines up with Harry's version, but that would only marginally diminish the value and it would make handling it safer anyway, so I think we should stick with Harry's version as it portrays us both in a good light. Granted, I would rather be the one slaying the basilisk, but letting a minor and a student of mine get bitten by a basilisk and serve as a distraction would be highly irresponsible and hurt my reputation accordingly."

"If either one of you got bitten by the basilisk, then why are you still alive? They are highly poisonous after all. And there's no mark whatsoever!" Ginny pointed out.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Obviously, we healed him with the vial of phoenix tears I've always kept with me ever since learning of the basilisk's existence." He paused, considering. "She does have a point about that lack of a mark, though. Diffindo!"

"Hey!" Lockhart protested as his left sleeve fell off. "These are good robes!"

"They've also been exposed to all of the grime from a millennia of no one cleaning anything down here, remember?" Harry asked, waving his wand and vanishing the sleeve.

"I suppose..." Lockhart sighed. "The sacrifices I make, I swear..."

"Sacrifices?" Ginny sputtered. "It's a sleeve! And you don't have even have the Sword of Gryffindor, so how are you going to explain that?"

"You know," Harry told her, annoyed. "You sound a lot like Hermione right now. And don't worry; I filched the Sword from Dumbledore's office months ago." He pulled the miniature Sword out of his pocket, unshrunk it, and then cut through the basilisk's mouth to both infuse the sword with basilisk venom and to make it look like that caused the death in case it should ever come up.

"But how are you going to explain how you got the Sword in the first place?" Ginny demanded. "Unless you're admitting to robbery?"

Harry looked shocked. "Of course not; that'd be bad for my image. I'm going to say the Sorting Hat gave it to me in my time of need. Things like that have happened before with the Sorting Hat providing what people need in a time of crisis, so Dumbledore should buy that." Harry held up his hand to forestall her next question. "And before you ask, I gave Peeves three cases of Dungbombs earlier this year with the understanding that he would get six more if he would take the Sorting Hat the minute he heard that there would be a lockdown and get it to me as soon as possible."

Ginny paled. "Are you really sure it's a good idea to enable him like that?"

Harry shrugged. "Eh, what do I care? He likes me. Calls me a 'good force of chaos' and whatnot. Besides, it's the only way I could possibly get the Sorting Hat without its absence being noticed too far in advance or its presence being noticed while I'm supposed to have it down here."

"How are you going to explain how you got the Hat, then?" Ginny was running out of questions and for that Harry was grateful. He had already worked out all the details weeks ago and was starting to regret (just a little, of course) that he had refused Lockhart's suggestion of simply Obliviating her and claiming that she had been unconscious the whole time.

"Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix that he can't possibly have kept an eye on this entire time, brought it to me for showing great loyalty to Dumbledore down here," Harry said smoothly.

"...What?"

"It's the kind of thing that he'd eat up," Harry explained. "So how about it?"

Ginny looked torn. It was a much better story, but the Weasley's had raised her to be reasonably honest so she wasn't sure.

Lockhart put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let me handle this. Five percent."

Ginny looked startled. "Pardon?"

"We'll give you five percent of the profit we're making for selling the basilisk parts," Lockhart elaborated. He glanced over at Luna. "That goes for you, too, of course."

"Oh goody," Luna said. "Just think of the funding for future rare creature hunting expeditions!"

"Well, er, right then," Lockhart looked a little thrown. "So what do you think, Miss Weasley?"

"Are you sure Professor Dumbledore would let you sell the basilisk? It is technically Hogwarts property, after all," she pointed out.

"Since Voldemort and I are the only two British Parselmouths right now, he won't be able to get into the Chamber and if he tries to use me to get in so he can use the Basilisk, I'll refuse, citing trauma. Besides, Professor Lockhart already made arrangements for this to be taken care of, so all we need to do is send the dead basilisk to his preserver, as such," and Harry waved his wand and the basilisk body disappeared accordingly, "and there, completely out of Hogwarts grounds and good luck proving where we got it from."

"All right..." Ginny agreed reluctantly. "But only if you don't tell my parents."

"Why not?" Lockhart asked. "There's nothing technically illegal about giving you a share of the profits, even though we're basically bribing you, because we can claim it's because you were here when we got rid of it."

"If my parents know, they'll make me put it in the bank and won't let me touch it until I'm seventeen," Ginny explained. "I'm not saying I want to spend all of it now, but a little spending money would be nice."

"We agree to your terms," Harry said quickly, before she could change her mind or ask for a bigger cut. "Luna?"

"Hm?" she looked up from where she was playing with Norbert on the floor. "Oh, that should be fine. It doesn't really matter if my father finds out, however. He's always believed in the Chamber of Secrets, you know."

"I can imagine," Harry grinned. "Aren't you glad we're going with a much more heroic version of events, Ginny?" Not to mention a version that was almost identical to what had originally happened, so it wasn't even really lying all that much. Except for Lockhart's involvement, but that was kind of a giving where Lockhart was involved.

"How are we getting back up?" Luna asked.

Harry frowned. "You know, I didn't really think of that. I GUESS we could walk back to where the entrance is and I could take turns flying people up with me."

"If you could do that then why did you push me down there instead of doing that in the first place?" Lockhart looked annoyed again.

"Nostalgia," Harry said simply and refused to elaborate.

They were about to go when they heard moaning coming from near the statue. Harry could have kicked himself. He'd forgotten about Pettigrew! Again! God, Sirius was going to kill him.

Harry quickly sprinted towards Pettigrew and drew his wand, aiming to stun him. Pettigrew was faster, however, and turned into his animagus form. Harry narrowed his eyes. There was no way in hell he'd let Pettigrew get away now. After all, what was the point in coming back in time if you let Pettigrew get away to go revive Voldemort in the exact same way?

Harry dropped his wand and transformed into his own animagus form, ignoring the gasps from Lockhart and Ginny. He lunged at Pettigrew (thanking God that the rat hadn't gotten very far because there were a LOT of rats down here. Although how Pettigrew thought he'd be able to get out of the Chamber was beyond him. Maybe Lockhart had a point about the whole stairs thing. Either way, Pettigrew was no longer a Parselmouth and so he couldn't possibly be able to utilize any of that) and caught him in his mouth. He slithered over to towards his companions (for, of course, his animagus form was a snake) and observed their reactions. Ginny and Lockhart looked shell-shocked while Luna, naturally, appeared to be completely unfazed. That wasn't surprising. What was surprising was when she took out a jar, plucked Pettigrew from Harry's mouth, and placed in the jar before screwing the lid on.

"Are you sure that's going to hold him?" Harry asked once he'd transformed back.

"Other than the fact that if he tried to transform he'd cut himself on all the glass and very possibly kill himself, yes, my father made this jar animagus-proof in case I ever ran into one I didn't want to get away," Luna explained.

"And...you carry that around with you everywhere?" Lockhart asked her.

"Of course," she said serenely. "One never knows when one will run into an animagus one doesn't wish to escape."

"Well...that's convenient," Harry said, still a little confused.

"Almost as convenient as you suddenly having a snake animagus form," Ginny countered.

Harry waved her suspicion off. "Oh, please, I've been an animagus for years now."

"You're only a second-year, though," she protested.

"What can I say? I'm very talented," Harry said modestly.

Ginny snorted. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Because it's illegal to be an animagus when you're not of age, yet," Harry explained as if it were obvious. Which it was. Especially for someone whose dad worked in the Ministry. "Now, if that's all..." He looked to Ginny, clearly expecting her to find some other problem with what was going on.

She just sighed, however. "Let's go, then."

--

Myrtle was a little depressed when they got back. Not only were they all still alive (although she was grateful once Harry pointed out that if he had become a ghost and hung out with her, she'd never get any peace from anyone ever due to Harry's mild attention-seeking

tendencies) but Peeves had been tormenting her as he waited for Harry to get back to give him the Sorting Hat. When Harry handed over the promised six cases of Dungbombs, Ginny looked like the next few days were going to be more terrifying than her entire experience as Diary!Riddle's hostage.

Eventually, Harry, Lockhart, Ginny, Luna, and the captured Pettigrew made their way up to Dumbledore's office where they found Dumbledore, Arthur and Molly Weasley, Xenophilius Lovegood, Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape, Rita Skeeter, and a man that Harry could only assume was his godfather.

"We're alive," Harry announced cheerfully.

"Oh Ginny!" Molly exclaimed tearfully, pulling her daughter into a hug.
"Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine, mom," Ginny assured. "As to what happened...well, maybe I should let Harry and Professor Lockhart explain that."

"Did you have fun, Luna?" Xenophilius asked, after examining her for hidden wounds and finding none.

"Oh yes," Luna said. "I didn't much like getting kidnapped or Norbert getting petrified, but other than that the rescue was quite interesting."

"Is there a reason you felt the need to go running off on a suicidal rescue mission without informing a responsible adult, first?" Snape asked Harry in between sneering at Probably!Sirius, who he seemed to have taken an instant dislike to. Harry was sure Probably!Sirius was completely innocent in the matter.

"I did get a responsible adult," Harry said innocently. "Professor Lockhart is a Hogwarts Professor and surely Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have hired him if he didn't have complete faith in him."

McGonagall coughed delicately but didn't say anything to contradict him.

"So, Mr. Malfoy, is it true that-" Rita Skeeter began.

"I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else," Harry said apologetically. "I'm Harry Potter." He paused. "And yes, I did go down to the Chamber of Secrets."

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It took twenty minutes before the room was quiet enough for Harry to tell the story of what went down (sticking to the version they had agreed upon and embellishing quite a bit) and Harry was pleased to note that Rita was using her Quick-Quote Quill so as to make everything even more over-the-top. And since Rita was, for some ungodly reason, a well-respected journalist, everyone would take her word that things went down like Harry claimed they did.

"What about Peter?" was the first thing Probably!Sirius wanted to know.

Harry winced. "I...well, I kind of forgot about him."

"What do you mean you 'kind of' forgot about him?" Definitely!Sirius looked downright murderous.

"Fortunately, he woke up before we could leave and then we caught him," Harry hastened to reassure him.

"So you only caught him because of chance?!?!" Sirius wasn't very happy about that.

"Just be glad we caught him at all," Harry advised.

"What do you mean by you caught Peter?" Dumbledore asked. "Who is this 'Peter'?"

Luna answered before Harry could. "Peter Pettigrew, illegal rat animagus and secret Death Eater extraordinaire," she said, sounding quite like an auctioneer as she pulled out the jar.

"Oh, good thinking, Luna," Xenophilius beamed with pride as he recognized the jar.

Luna took off the lid and placed Pettigrew gingerly on the floor. Before he could make a break for it, Sirius had his wand out a shot a spell at him to force him to revert back to human form.

“Peter Pettigrew?” McGonagall gasped, firmly identifying him for the somewhat skeptical Ginny. “But...you...and Black, he...”

“You said you wanted to see me, Dumbledore?” Fudge asked, flinging open the door to Dumbledore’s office and followed – for whatever reason – by Lucius Malfoy. “Peter Pettigrew? Didn’t you blow up?”

“As it happens, I did not call for you, Cornelius,” Dumbledore said genially, taking this all in stride. “But it’s a good thing you’re here. We were just about to question Mr. Pettigrew about his...survival, shall we say? Severus? Would you?”

Snape nodded jerkily and moved towards the panicked Pettigrew to administer some Veritaserum.

“I...I wanted to tell you,” Pettigrew said desperately. “About my being alive. But I was afraid. Sirius wanted me dead and I was, uh, very depressed after what happened with Lily and James that I just wanted to, er, lose myself.”

“So you chose to be a rat?” Lucius asked incredulously. “Dear God, you really are an idiot, aren’t you?”

Pettigrew opened his mouth to respond and Snape took that opportunity to force the drops of Veritaserum down his throat.

“I’ll handle this, if you don’t mind, Cornelius?” Dumbledore asked politely. Seeing no objection, he continued, “What is your name?”

“Peter Pettigrew.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone you were alive?” Dumbledore began.

“I was afraid,” Pettigrew repeated.

Harry decided this would probably take too long if the extraordinarily patient Dumbledore was left in charge of the interrogation and he just wanted to get clearing Sirius over with before his Polyjuice Potion ran out. “Did you kill those Muggles that died after Sirius confronted you about my parents’ deaths?”

“Yes.”

Everyone looked rather shocked at that. Well, except for Luna and her father who were never really shocked at anything and Lucius, who probably knew it all along.

“Are you a Death Eater?” Harry quickly followed up.

“Yes.”

“Is Sirius a Death Eater?” Harry finished his questions.

“No.”

“Well, there you go,” Harry said, crossing his arms. “So when will the pardon be done with?”

“I...Pardon?” Fudge asked, confused.

“Well, naturally,” Harry nodded. “And I’d hurry up with that. Otherwise, when Rita writes that article and everyone hears how you refused to let a clearly innocent-” Snape snorted at this “- man go, the court of public opinion will string you up.”

“I...” Fudge looked lost.

“Will he hurry this up?” Sirius asked. “I am SO not in the mood.”

“As the actress said to the bishop,” Harry said immediately.

Sirius looked confused. “Um...okay...”

"Just reminding you that we're British," Harry said cheerfully. "Seeing as how you've apparently forgotten."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Dear God, Harry, I went to Las Vegas, I didn't apply for citizenship." He smirked. "Although 'that's what she said' rolls off the tongue SO much better."

"Alright, I'll do it," Fudge decided before Harry had the chance to hex his errant godfather.

Harry looked up. Dumbledore had apparently spent the last five minutes appealing to Fudge's public approval rating and even though Lucius looked furious, he seemed to have succeeded.

"I just need to draw up the paperwork and—" Fudge began.

"Way ahead of you," Harry interrupted, pulling out an official pardon for Sirius he'd bribed several people to obtain. "Sign here, please. Oh, and you too, Professor."

Looking slightly bemused, Fudge did so. Looking incredibly amused and not at all concerned about how Harry had gotten ahold of the pardon in the first place, Dumbledore followed.

"Freedom! At last!" Sirius cheered right as the Polyjuice Potion wore off.

"Does everything always work out this conveniently for you?" Ginny asked incredulously as Fudge clutched his heart in shock and tried (and failed) not to look terrified.

"Pretty much, yeah," Harry affirmed.

Lucius just looked disgusted before storming to the door, no doubt resolving to go look for a minion to support for Minister of Magic who was less influenced by Dumbledore. Harry thought he saw Dobby lurking outside the door and decided to take a chance and hope this worked.

"Hey, Mr. Malfoy," he called out.

Lucius spun to face him. "What?" he snapped.

"Catch," he said, pulling the dragon-hide gloves out of his pocket and throwing them at him.

Lucius caught them an inch from his face and tossed them aside, wordlessly sneering at Harry.

Harry watched in amusement as Dobby dived halfway across the hallway to catch the gloves.

"Let's go, Dobby," Lucius commanded, continuing to stalk down the hallway without checking to see that Dobby was following him. Eventually, when Lucius tried to hit Dobby over the head with his cane to make himself feel better about how spectacularly poorly everything in the office went, he noticed Dobby hadn't moved. He was holding up Harry's probably-poisonous gloves like they were priceless treasures.

"Master has given Dobby gloves," Dobby said in wonderment. "Master gave them to Dobby."

"What's that?" spat Lucius. "What did you say?"

"Dobby has got a pair of gloves," said Dobby in disbelief. "Master threw them, and Dobby caught them, and Dobby- Dobby is free."

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

But Dobby shouted, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backwards. He crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing below.

He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long threatening finger.

"You shall go now," he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Malfoy.
"You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now. And Dobby thought you should know that the reason people laugh when they think you're not looking is because they think that Bad Master Draco is not your son."

Lucius Malfoy eyes burned with outrage, but Dobby gave him no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight, probably to ask Narcissa some very awkward questions.

Harry couldn't believe that after everything, Lucius finally managed to hear the rumors or that it was Dobby that finally told him. He would have done it ages ago, but he had promised Draco he wouldn't. Well, sort of promised. And besides, Harry knew it would mean more coming from Dobby.

He headed back to Dumbledore's office where he heard Snape and Sirius arguing loudly.

"You tried to kill me!" Sirius was yelling.

"We were at war!" Snape defended himself.

"It looked pretty personal to me," Sirius countered.

"You proved you're a bloodthirsty killer when you were sixteen!" Snape snapped.

Molly and Arthur looked disturbed at that and Sirius quickly said, "It wasn't that bad, really. And besides, you have GOT to learn to let these things go. Carrying around a decade's worth of resentment cannot possibly be good for you."

Harry snorted. Hypocrite.

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty-Six

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Okay, this caused a lot of confusion, so...Snape trying to kill Sirius isn't ever mentioned in the books, but given their almost incredible level of animosity even twelve years later, it isn't too much of a stretch to think that should they ever meet in battle, they would immediately go after the other. Also, I updated! Yay!

Despite himself, Harry quite enjoyed the impromptu all-night 'The School Is No Longer At Risk And We Didn't Even Have To Do Anything' party immediately following everyone's departure from Dumbledore's office. It was a bit late notice, but that was nothing more than cause for both anxiety and celebration for the Hogwarts House Elves.

As Harry had quite a flair for the dramatic, it was only natural that he was a gifted story-teller and so the entire student body seemed quite eager to hear Harry's tale, none more so than the thrill-seeking Gryffindors. He delighted in regaling his housemates with the official version of the tale – to Ginny's great annoyance – and only stopped when it came time for points to be announced.

The minute Dumbledore started listing the current point tallies, Harry ran like his life depended on it to the Slytherin table again. Glancing at Harry oddly, Dumbledore nonetheless continued his recitation, "In first place we have Gryffindor House with 638 points. In second place, we have Slytherin with 427 points. In third place we have Ravenclaw with 383 points. And in fourth place we have Hufflepuff with 358 points." No one was particularly surprised by this news. It had become quite clear early on this year, if not by the end of last year, that – despite his best efforts – Harry Potter was simply not capable of losing the House Cup. What happened next did surprise people quite a bit.

"Congratulations, Gryffindor, and well done," Dumbledore beamed in Harry's general direction. "But before you start celebrating, recent events must be taken into consideration. This has been a very trying year for all of us, working to keep the unfortunate basilisk infestation

and inconvenient hospitalizations out of the paper. Had the Board of Governors or the Ministry gotten word of this before it was taken care of...well, I shudder to think of what might have happened then. However, I'm pleased to inform you that the basilisk has been defeated by Professor Lockhart and three exceptional students. In light of this, I have a few last-minute points to distribute."

"Not again!" a Ravenclaw upperclassman who Harry only vaguely recognized groaned. There were several murmurs of agreement from various other non-Gryffindors, which the Headmaster blithely ignored.

"First, to Ms. Luna Lovegood and Ms. Ginevra Weasley for remaining calm and collected in a hostage situation, as well as assisting with catching the perpetrator, I award Gryffindor and Ravenclaw each 200 points." Dumbledore paused here, clearly expecting applause, but everyone was too stunned at a non-Gryffindor garnering some last-minute points to do anything but stare at him. "And to Mr. Harry Potter for his quick-thinking, resourcefulness, selflessness, responsibility in alerting a faculty member, and bravery, I award Gryffindor 400 points."

"I don't believe it," Harry moaned dejectedly. "I mean, I do, but I wish I didn't. 600 extra points...that's, what, 1238? This almost DOUBLED our points. I know I'm supposed to be Dumbledore's favorite student and all, but it sure doesn't seem like it sometimes..."

"I can't believe it," Draco echoed Harry's sentiment. "A Ravenclaw coming in second place? Slytherin in third? I think I'm in shock. Or maybe this is all one big long nightmare...maybe this whole year is just one never-ending nightmare. I probably got a concussion on the train when you and the Weasel fell from the sky any minute now I'll wake up in the Hospital Wing."

"Amen to that," Harry said fervently.

"You know," Daphne Greengrass said thoughtfully. "I've just noticed that every year, it always comes down to either Gryffindor or Slytherin winning the House Cup and Ravenclaw maybe coming in second, depending on how good their Quidditch team is. Or depending on whether or not one of them goes along with the Headmaster's pet

student's annual suicide attempt. Why is it that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff never win? I mean, obviously they are less likely to engage in the foolish heroics that is the Gryffindor claim to fame or strategizing, like we do, but you'd think it would happen every once in a while."

"I am NOT Dumbledore's pet student!" Harry protested. "And I'm not suicidal! It's just that...well, everything always seems to revolve around me."

Theodore Nott looked up from his pudding. "Yes you are, on both counts. You're also incredibly full of yourself."

Harry sent him a withering glare. "No one asked you."

"And no one asked you to sit here," Theodore pointed out. "And yet, here we both are."

Harry opened his mouth and then quickly closed it again. That was actually a very good point.

"To answer your question, Daphne," Draco said, smirking at Harry's speechlessness, "the houses are usually pretty evenly matched for most of the year. After all, Gryffindors often get points for their rash actions and they lose them just as easily. We get plenty of points as well, but have an unfortunate number of...confrontations, that often cost us. Ravenclaws get points for sheer brilliance and the Hufflepuffs rake in their share by just consistently doing what they're supposed to do. At the end of the year, Gryffindors inevitably pull some big stupid stunt that will either succeed and propel them into first place or fail miserably and give Ravenclaw a chance to come in second. We go all-out on our attempts to win points and in the absence of something like Harry slaying a basilisk or saving the Philosopher's Stone, we usually win. Ravenclaws are usually too busy studying to worry too much about how the House Cup would suit their overachieving nature and as for the Hufflepuffs...what are they going to do? Do exactly what they're supposed to do MORE?"

"You've...put a lot of thought into this," Harry said, startled, as soon as he regained his powers of speech.

Draco shot him an incredulous look. "I'm a Malfoy. Surely you don't think we just get by on our looks and wealth?"

"Er..." As it happened, that was exactly what Harry thought.

"It's all about strategy," Draco explained. "There are a lot of very rich people and, with the resources magic affords us, a lot of very pretty people as well. If you want to have an edge, you've got to put some thought into it."

Harry wasn't quite sure how to respond to that and so was quite relieved when Lockhart leaned over to say something to Dumbledore, who quickly stood up again. "It has been brought to my attention that I have neglected to mention that once again, our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor will be leaving us at the end of the year. I am happy to report that, unlike his predecessor, Professor Lockhart is perfectly alright and will, in fact, be retiring to write his new book *Baiting the Basilisk*. Professor Lockhart has asked me to tell you that anyone who wishes to be quoted in the book should approach him before the end of term."

Harry quickly glanced over at the Gryffindor table. Ginny looked mutinous. Guess she didn't want to be included in the book, then.

--

Harry figured that he might as well say goodbye to Lockhart before he left, seeing as how he had put a great deal of effort into preventing him from getting brain damaged that year.

"So how many people did volunteer to help with your book?" Harry asked curiously.

"Easily three-quarters of the students. In fact, I may have to publish a separate book with all of their accounts," Lockhart looked delighted at the prospect. "I'm not sure what I'd call it, though..."

Harry shrugged. "Don't ask me; I'm not a wordsmith. Try asking Luna, she came up with '*Baiting the Basilisk*' after all."

"Ah yes, that is a clever title," Lockhart agreed. "It's nice to see she's doing something to earn that five percent."

"Luna's naturally helpful like that," Harry said shortly.

"That she is," Lockhart agreed, holding out that day's edition of the Daily Prophet. "Did you see the article your reporter friend wrote? It's quite a nice touch."

Intrigued, Harry took the proffered paper.

Basilisk and Black Invade Hogwarts

By Rita Skeeter

Rumors have been flying for months now that Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore has been hiding the reopening of the Chamber of Secrets and a basilisk has been running amok petrifying anyone in its path. Despite these insistences and a visit by Hogwarts Governor Lucius Malfoy and Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge, no trace of this alleged basilisk was found. Until now, that is.

Yesterday, this reporter was contacted by an anonymous party claiming to represent Harry Potter and told that Hogwarts was about to reveal the mystery surrounding the castle all year. Skeptical but intrigued, this reporter quickly made her way to Dumbledore's office, where the Weasley and Lovegood families and Professor Severus Snape were already waiting.

Shortly thereafter, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart came charging in along with first-years Ginevra Weasley and Luna Lovegood and Harry Potter himself! Upon questioning, this reporter discovered that these heroes had just discovered a previously unknown basilisk lurking in a hidden chamber, deep beneath the school. The fabled Chamber of Secrets, perhaps (details on page 5)?

As Lockhart and Potter launched into their heroic tale (details on Page 3), it was revealed that the mastermind behind the basilisk attack and kidnapping of Lovegood and Weasley was none other

than Peter Pettigrew, long-dead war hero, Order of Merlin first class recipient, and apparently illegal animagus. Stunned, Fudge and Dumbledore quickly agreed to pardon Azkaban escapee Sirius Black as Pettigrew was clearly not blown up and – upon questioning – confessed to the other murders Black was imprisoned for (details on page 4).

And not a moment too soon as this reporter's contact's Polyjuice Potion (which grants the user the ability to assume someone else's form for an hour) wore off and was revealed to be none other than the recently-pardoned Black himself! Black had apparently been tracking Pettigrew for over a year now in order to prove his innocence (Black's story on page 7).

Says Black, "I am understandably very frustrated at the years I spent wrongfully imprisoned by I am confident that now that the truth is out, justice will be served and I intend to seek custody of my godson, Harry Potter and move on with my life."

When asked, Potter had this to say on the subject, "I will admit that I do not know Sirius very well, but I am firmly convinced that he has only my best interests at heart and feel that a magical environment would be better suited for me than the Muggle one I have spent most of my life in. Besides, Sirius was my father's best friend and the person my parents entrusted my safety to in the event anything happened to them. Living with Sirius is something that I want and, what's more, it's what my parents would have wanted."

Though this all took place in Dumbledore's office, he was unavailable for comment.

"Well, Harry, it's been quite an adventure this year," Lockhart said when Harry had finished. "And what's more, I didn't even have to erase anyone's memories. I'm...not quite sure how I feel about that. I strongly feel like I should, but there really doesn't seem to be much of a need, does there? Either way, I enjoyed mentoring you and I think I might actually miss you."

"That's sweet," Harry grinned. "Because God knows that I'm going to miss the opportunity to find out whether or not it is, in fact, possible to beat someone to death with a paper napkin."

"Chin up," Lockhart said cheerfully. "You have five more years to get around to that."

--

Harry spent this train ride home, as he had the last one, desperately evading Hermione's attempts to pester him about his phenomenal test scores. The exams had actually been less painful this year than the year before. Partly, Harry supposed, because the material was slightly more challenging and partly because he hadn't actually taken exams his original second year.

"So what are your plans for this summer?" Ron eventually asked. "I'd ask you to come stay again, but I think Ginny would pitch a fit." Ginny hadn't quite managed to get over her disappointment in the week or so since her rescue, but Harry wasn't worried. After all, it's not like she could stay mad at him forever. Well, probably. She was a Weasley, after all, and only ended up forgiving Percy because Fred had died and she didn't want to lose another brother unnecessarily.

"Don't worry about it," Harry said easily. "After Sirius threatened to sue Dumbledore, Fudge, and half the Ministry for wrongful imprisonment due to his lack of a trial and said he'd tell everyone I was kidnapped after my parents' deaths and forced to live with a bunch of magic-hating Muggles, Fudge kind of overruled Dumbledore and granted him custody."

"Because your godfather threatened him?" Hermione was shocked.
"That's preposterous. Dumbledore should have-"

"Dumbledore was probably thinking about his career; he is a politician after all," Neville pointed out. "As is Fudge. Besides, as Harry's godfather, Sirius Black has legal rights to Harry should his biological family choose to give theirs up-"

"Which they did," Harry cut in. "The lawyer could barely get the words out before they agreed. Most people would assume this meant that they hated me, but Dumbledore got all teary-eyed and went on about how moved he was that they would give up the rights to their precious nephew in a sweet – if misguided – attempt to make him happy."

"And unless Dumbledore wants to explain to the Wizengamot and the wizarding population at large that he felt that a then-one-year-old and current twelve-year-old is the key to defeating You-Know-Who, there's really nothing he can do," Neville concluded.

"But it's still not right!" Hermione insisted.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, well, neither is locking my godfather in prison for ten years without a trial because he didn't want to have to cede custody of me."

Hermione just gaped at him for a few seconds. "I acknowledge this is a terrible miscarriage of justice, but surely you aren't suggesting that Professor Dumbledore could have done something different and didn't simply because he wanted you to be with people who hated you!"

"I don't know, Hermione," Ron said uncertainly. "He is the Chief Warlock even back then, not to mention the Supreme Mugwump. He probably could have done something."

"How can you say that?" Hermione demanded. "He's DUMBLEDORE! He-"

"Isn't perfect and maybe it's time you just accepted that," Harry interrupted, tiredly. "Anyway, as I was saying, after Sirius got custody of me, he and Luna's dad started talking and Sirius decided it might be fun to go looking for rare and – some might consider – fictional characters. Since I found the Crumple-Horned Snorkack, we'd have to find something new to look for, but that proved my prowess as a tracker."

"You're doing that the whole summer?" Neville said, his voice carefully neutral. "That's...great for you."

"Oh, not the whole summer," Harry assured him. "I also got an early start on my divination and saw that the Ron's Dad will win the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw and head to Egypt to visit Bill, so Sirius and I plan to spend a month there, as well."

"Win the...the grand prize?" Ron sounded incredulous.

"You're going to travel to a foreign country for a month on the off-chance your prediction comes true?" Hermione sounded skeptical and Harry was fairly sure she was restraining herself from saying more.

"Well...I really just want to see Fred and George try and shut Percy in a pyramid," Harry admitted. "But I'm sure I'll have fun, even if that doesn't end up happening."

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"Harry dear!" Mrs. Weasley gushed after she had greeted her own children. "How nice to see you again!"

"Hello Mrs. Weasley," Harry greeted warmly. "Have you met my godfather, Sirius Black?"

Mrs. Weasley's smile became slightly fixed. She had heard of the acquittal, of course, but was clearly uncomfortable when faced with said ex-con face to face. "Ah, I heard you have custody of Harry now?"

Sirius beamed. "It's been eight days today."

"Are you sure that you're up to the challenge, so soon after coming back to wizarding society?" Mrs. Weasley asked tentatively.

"Harry's a great kid and Dumbledore has been a *great* help in the whole reintegration process," Sirius said cheerfully. "Couldn't have done it without him. You know, it means the world to me to be able to take in Lily and James' son. They were...they were family to me, I'm

glad I can finally fulfill their wishes and try and keep their memory alive for their son."

"Oh!" Mrs. Weasley's voice was noticeably warmer at the thought of Harry having a link to his parents at last.

While they continued to talk, Harry looked around the station idly. "Hey! Draco!" Harry said, walking up to him. "Listen, I wanted to thank you for all your help this year with Dob-"

Draco looked distinctively uncomfortable as he indicated a rather put-out Narcissa Malfoy. "Harry, this is my mother. Mother, this is Harry Potter."

Narcissa smile chilled Harry to the bone. "A pleasure, I'm sure." Harry translated that to be something along the lines of 'you better hope you never run into me in a dark alley or so help me...' Hm. What was the deal with her?

"Ready to go, Harry?" Sirius asked, coming up behind him. "Ah, cousin Narcissa. How are you?"

If anything, her smile grew even colder. "Sirius, I was so glad to hear of your acquittal. Now, if you'll excuse us..."

"Wow," Harry said finally. "I don't ever remember her so...cold before."

"Well, that's because you never saw her with me," Sirius laughed.

"Ooh, what happened?" Harry asked.

"Well, there might have been an incident seventh year during a Hogsmeade weekend when she was out with her boyfriend involving a frog, a bottle of pink hair dye, and a trampoline," Sirius admitted.

"Do tell," Harry encouraged.

"First of all, I fully deny any and all involvement. My presence – along with James, Remus, and he-who-is-not-worth-mentioning – was

completely coincidental. As was James' camera. It all started when..."

And with that, godfather and godson headed off to what promised to be the carefree summer either of them had had for quite some time.

Review please!

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Harry had an amazing summer. Absolutely. I really couldn't do it justice, so I'm skipping over all of it. It was awesome though, really. :p

It had been a good summer, Harry reflected as he sat across from his godfather at Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour. True, he, Sirius, Luna, and her father had had little luck tracking the Blibbering Humdinger in Zaire and true that he had been forced to speak French for nearly six weeks (this was, naturally, the worst thing that had happened to him in recent memory, though Sirius was unsympathetic told him he was just being dramatic) but he had had fun anyway. His and Sirius's month in Egypt – after the Weasley's had, in fact, won the 700 Galleon Draw – had been even more amusing, although Percy had joined Ginny in the 'Not Speaking to Harry' department after Harry had distracted Mrs. Weasley while Fred and George had locked him in a pyramid. He didn't see what the big deal was, anyway. Percy was only in there for three hours and had confessed afterwards that he had learned quite a bit that he wouldn't otherwise have an opportunity to because he was unsupervised. Apparently while the new Head Boy had come to expect behavior like that from the twins he had 'expected better' of Harry.

"Do you think they're done with their school supply shopping yet?" Harry asked. "I'm bored."

Sirius, who had been thoughtfully eyeing a group of rather pretty witches, blinked and looked over at him. "You're the one who hired Dobby to do yours for you," he reminded him.

"Well, yeah, but it didn't occur to me that I'd be stuck waiting here for everyone else to finish theirs," Harry complained.

"Yes, who would have thought that Hermione would freak out that you were paying Dobby below minimum wage – and yes, I know he insisted on it," Sirius held up a hand to forestall Harry's protest, "Ron would get insulted that you were rubbing it in his face that you're so

rich you won't even do your own shopping, Ginny still wouldn't be speaking to you, and Luna and Neville would be off to prove that Wrackspurts have infested Ollivander's."

"It's a conspiracy, I tell you," Harry said forlornly.

"You've still got me," Sirius said brightly.

Harry didn't respond.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Well you could have tagged along with them anyway," he pointed out.

"That would totally defeat the purpose of me paying Dobby to do it for me," Harry said, sounding shocked. "I wonder why Draco always insists on doing his own shopping."

"House Elves have notoriously poor color scheme," Draco replied, the shop door slamming shut behind him.

"Pinch me, I must be dreaming," Harry said to Sirius, who immediately did so. "Draco Malfoy has remembered that I exist."

Draco crossed his arms irritably. "I never forgot."

"Then why didn't you reply to any of the 37 letters I've sent you this summer?" Harry demanded.

"Other than the fact that most of the were full of meaningless drivel about people I don't care about?" Draco asked. At Harry's nod, he continued, "Once my father found out about that stupid rumor you started – and we all know you did so don't bother denying it – he and my mother have been fighting and so they forbid me from having anything to do with you. And also because they think you're new guardian might be a bad influence."

"Like they're one to talk..." Sirius grumbled. "And you're having something to do with him right now."

Draco grinned. Harry was sure that as a result somewhere a puppy just died. “I’m officially a teenager. I’ve got to get that rebellion in somehow, don’t I? Anyway, my mother’s just finishing up with Madam Malkin, so I’ve got to go. Be seeing you, Harry.”

“Uh, bye...” Harry replied distractedly. He turned to Sirius. “That was weird.”

“Indeed it was,” Sirius agreed. “Me? A bad influence? Some people...”

“Well, you are a recently pardoned fugitive who spent who knows how many years in Azkaban,” Harry pointed out tactfully.

“My record was expunged,” Sirius countered. “That means that legally, it never happened and I’ve decided to refuse to acknowledge that it did. Besides, Lucius is a Death Eater.”

“He was cleared of all charges, so legally he isn’t,” Harry pointed out.

Sirius snorted at that. “Speaking of Death Eaters, how do we stand on the Diary front?”

Harry frowned, confused for a moment until he realized that by ‘Diary’ Sirius meant ‘Horcrux’ and that he was – for once – mindful that there were other people around him that could potentially be eavesdropping on them. “Well, we’ve stabbed the diary, burned the cup, locket, and diadem, the snake probably isn’t one yet and we can take care of her later if she is one, I’m still one, so that just leaves...the ring.”

“Where’s the ring?” Sirius asked. “Can we take care of that today? You’re going back to school tomorrow and that severely restricts your movements.”

“That’s true,” Harry agreed slowly. “If I’m going, it’ll have to be today. Does now work for you?”

Sirius discreetly glanced at his watch. “Alright. We need to hurry, though. I have a meeting with Dumbledore in twenty minutes.”

"Oh really?" Harry asked as they got up to leave. "Why's that?"

"If it works, you'll find out. If it doesn't, I'm not going to tell you," Sirius told him primly. "Now where did you say we were going?"

"Little Hangington...Now, wait, Little Hangleton," Harry corrected himself.

"Are you sure you know where we're going?" Sirius asked suspiciously.

"Of course! I just haven't been there in...let's see...eleven years. I think. And I never actually did go to the Gaunt Shack. Actually, I don't think I can give good enough instructions. I'll just have to Apparate us both," Harry decided. "That'll probably work better anyway because I'm technically too young to Apparate so we can pretend you're the one doing it."

Sirius looked distinctly unhappy but he did as Harry requested. Harry closed his eyes and did his best to recall the graveyard he'd been transported to at the end of his Fourth Year, where Cedric had...

Harry felt a familiar yet unpleasant sensation around his navel and he opened his eyes. He was standing in the graveyard.

"Oh you have got to be kidding me," Sirius said, looking around. "Can you BE any more of an Emo teenager?"

"It's not my fault!" Harry protested. "Voldemort was the one with the overdeveloped sense of melodrama; I was just kidnapped and forced to be here!" He paused. "Sirius, you fell through the Veil in 1996. How do you even know the term 'Emo'?"

"I'm a fan of the music," Sirius said delicately. "Hey, can I borrow your Time Turner?"

"What makes you think I have a Time Turner?" Harry asked neutrally.

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," Sirius said, rolling his eyes.

"Okay, fine, I totally have one. What do you need it for?"

"Don't you trust me?" Sirius asked, looking wounded.

"No, not even slightly," Harry replied.

"PLEEEEEEEASE."

"Give me a reason," Harry instructed.

"I'll buy you a Firebolt."

Harry removed the Time Turner from around his neck. "Deal."

"Thanks," Sirius said, slipping it around his own neck. "Say, didn't you say Voldemort resurrected himself using his dad's bones?"

"Yeah..." Harry said, wondering where this was going.

"Since we have nearly two years until Voldemort will try to revive himself—" Sirius began.

"If history doesn't change that much, which, given our rather lackadaisical attitude towards things, isn't exactly a guarantee," Harry interjected.

Sirius nodded. "Right. If things still happen the way they should, we could destroy Riddle's bones and the ritual wouldn't work."

Harry thought about it. On the one hand, Voldemort not having a body would be a very good thing indeed. On the other... "We can't do that; if he doesn't do the ritual then he won't use my blood, anchoring my soul to this world so I can die and come back, therefore there's no way for me to get rid of my Horcrux without me dying. And staying dead."

"Can we at least switch his father's bones with someone else's then? Maybe a more distant relative? That way it should still work but maybe not as well so it could weaken him," Sirius suggested.

"Good idea," Harry said. "You do that while I go look for the Shack. Once you're done, just Apparate over to me."

"Sounds good," Sirius agreed, already moving among the graves, searching for someone to replace Tom Riddle Senior's earthly remains with.

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Ten minutes later Harry had successfully managed to not only locate the location of the Gaunt Shack, but also the location of the Ring and he heard a loud crack outside indicating that Sirius had arrived.

"Did you find it?" Sirius asked. "And is that the skeleton of a snake nailed to the door?"

"Of course," answered Harry, pointing. "To both of them. I'm having trouble with one of the wards, though."

"Let me see," Sirius waved his wand over the point Harry had gestured to. "Ah, I know how to deal with that." He muttered a spell under his breath. "There." He reached down and picked up the ring. "So this is the final Horcrux. Well, except for you, of course."

"Don't put it on," Harry warned. "Dumbledore did and it almost killed him. As it was, he only had a year left before he would have died from it, if Snape hadn't sped the process up."

"Uh-huh," Sirius said, clearly not listening and moving the ring closer to his finger, as if in a trance.

"Sirius, if you put that on then Snape will have to save your life. SNAPE. Do you really want to give him something like that to hold over your head forever? I can see it now: 'You tried to kill me when we were sixteen, Black, and I saved your life seventeen years later. It just goes to show that-'"

"I get it; I get it!" Sirius exclaimed, hastily dropping the Ring.

"That's better. Now what do you say we get out of here and just torch the place?" Harry suggested.

"Works for me. All the Dark Magical residue...it feels like I never left home..."

With that, Harry and Sirius left the shack and Sirius cast Fiendfyre, ridding the world of one more piece of Tom Riddle Jr.'s soul and one incredibly ugly house.

--

Sirius Apparated Harry back to Diagon Alley then quickly ran off to his mysterious meeting with Dumbledore that he refused to explain about. Strangely, for all his earlier insistence before that he needed to be on time, he didn't seem to care that he ended up being fifteen minutes late.

"Harry!" Hermione greeted him, thrusting a huge bundle of orange fur into his arms. Ron and Neville came up behind her.

"Crookshanks?" Harry ventured.

Hermione gaped at him. "But...I only just decided...how did you do that?"

"I told you, my scar is studying Divination," Harry replied smugly.

"Oh honestly, just because you're right about a few innocuous things you think you're the next coming of Cassandra or something," Hermione huffed.

"He was right about my dad and the Ministry Galleon Draw, too," Ron reminded her.

"And pretty much everything else he's ever said would happen has happened," Neville added. "He's either psychic or one hell of a conman."

"I don't see how you could POSSIBLY dispute the fact that I know the future," Harry said, secure in the knowledge that he did know at least one future, even if he was doing his best to change it for no other reason than sheer boredom and possibly to save a few lives. If he had time.

"You're not really taking Divination, are you?" Hermione asked, completely ignoring her friends' ribbing.

"Yep," Harry confirmed cheerfully. "And Muggle Studies and Care of Magical Creatures."

"...Why?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Why not? You are, after all," Harry pointed out.

"I'm also taking such practical classes as Arithmancy and Ancient Runes," Hermione shot back.

"Arithmancy, I'll give you, but I refuse to believe that Ancient Runes could possibly be practical," Harry said stubbornly. "And I don't want to take either of them because Divination and Muggle Studies will be so much easier."

"What about Care of Magical Creatures?" Ron asked. "Charlie took that and he said that it involves some real work."

"I know," Harry agreed, sounding rather put out. "But I have to support Hagrid, don't I?"

"Hagrid?" Neville asked shrewdly. "Is he our teacher, then? Since his name was cleared last year – sort of – when you told everybody about Voldemort opening the Chamber fifty years ago?"

Ron flinched. "Bloody hell; not you too! Doesn't anybody have a healthy fear of the most terrifying wizard in living memory anymore?"

Harry was pleased to note that Ron was no longer calling Riddle the most terrifying wizard ever as he and Hermione had finally managed to convince him that there was no objective way to judge something like that.

Neville shrugged. "My Gran says not calling him by the proper appellation is an insult to my parent's memories," he said quietly.

"Of course he's our teacher," Harry said, quickly changing the subject. "Who else would assign us a biting book?"

"It's a good thing the manager told us how to calm them," Hermione said. "I can't imagine what I'd do if I had to figure it out by myself."

"Easiest twenty galleons I ever made..." Harry grinned.

"You told the manager to stroke the spines?" Ron asked, surprised.

"Yep. He was already fed up with them just from trying to store them and so he was more than happy to hand it over," Harry smiled.

The four of them sat talking for another half an hour or so before Harry said innocently, "So Ron, you and Crookshanks sure seem to be getting along. Are you a closet cat person?"

"Maybe not closeted but recently discovered," Ron replied. "After all, cats eat rats."

"So they do," Harry laughed. His vision was then blocked by a large broomstick-shaped package. "Um...what?"

"It cost nearly all of my reparation money, but I got you your damn broomstick," Sirius said, moving into Harry's line of sight. "Now stop guilt-tripping me about my lack of presence during your formative years and all the Christmas', Birthdays', Halloweens', Easters', ect. that I missed and the corresponding gifts that I owe you."

"You guilt-tripped him about missing significant life events while he was in Azkaban?" Hermione asked, horrified.

"Hey," Harry said defensively. "It's not like he doesn't do the same thing! It's always 'You know, James would have done it' or 'Sometimes, Harry, I just get nostalgic and wish James were here.'" Hermione just continued to stare so Harry moved on. "So, how'd your mysterious meeting with the Headmaster go?"

Sirius grinned broadly. "Excellent. In fact, you're looking at Hogwarts's newest professor."

Harry shot him a look. "You're going to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts? But what about Remus?"

Sirius looked shocked. "Harry! I would never deprive Moony of his chance to act all responsible and put his years of tutoring to waste! He's still going to be teaching DADA."

"So what are you teaching?" Neville asked.

"History of Magic," Sirius replied happily.

"What about Professor Binns?" Hermione asked. "I hadn't thought he was looking to retire. Plus, he's got tenure so it's not like they can really fire him because he's boring."

Sirius looked mildly uncomfortable. "Well, during my interview, McGonagall came in and informed us that Binns had been mysteriously exorcised a little while ago. Imagine, while we were sitting here eating ice cream, poor Binns was ascending to a higher plane..."

Harry suddenly knew what Sirius had wanted his Time Turner for. "Imagine that." Suddenly, a thought struck him. "Wait...so we're going to have two Marauders as teachers? That is so awesome."

Sirius grinned evilly. "And old Snivelly will never know what hit him..."

Note: Poor Snape. Poor, poor, poor Snape. Even if Remus is too mature for anything drastic and is perfectly capable of behaving as a responsible adult, God knows Sirius isn't...

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: I have nothing against speaking French (I've only ever met one person from France, as a matter of fact, and he was there for my government class) but Harry is British and I've heard that those two nations enjoy a rivalry of some sort and Harry was just experiencing some nationalism.

"Can we PLEASE sit down now, Harry?" Hermione asked after Harry had dragged her, Ron, and Neville after him while he systematically searched the entire train twice. "If you haven't found whoever you're looking for by now; you're not going to find them. And look! Ginny and Luna are in the next compartment; let's go in there."

"But...but I haven't found Professor Lupin yet!" Harry protested.

Hermione's eye twitched. "You mean to say we've spent the last twenty minutes traipsing around with all our luggage because you're looking for a teacher?!?!"

"Uh...yes?" Harry scratched the back of his head nervously and wondered why Hermione looked like she was two seconds away from beanning him with her trunk.

"Professors don't ride the train with the students, Harry," Ron added, giving him a look that implied that he was convinced Harry had recently – or not so recently, depending on how you looked at it – suffered a severe head injury. "This is our third year; surely by now you've grasped that fact?"

"I know!" Harry did not appreciate Ron's lack of faith. "But I just thought that Professor Lupin might."

"Why?" Neville asked.

"...because he's weird like that?" Harry suggested.

Hermione sighed noisily. “At least you’re not bringing your scar into it this time. Now come on, let’s sit down before Harry thinks of somewhere else we can look.”

“You know, you didn’t have to come with me,” Harry said defensively as they headed off to join Ginny and Luna.

His friends exchanged looks. “Yes we did,” they chorused.

“After all, who knows what you’d get up to when left to your own devices?” Neville asked rhetorically.

“Good point,” Harry deadpanned. “After all, the last time that happened, Sirius and I defiled someone’s grave, burned down a house, vandalized a family heirloom, and...expedited... Binn’s journey to the afterlife.”

It was a measure of how often Harry said things like this that they all completely failed to react.

“I’m sure you had a good reason,” Luna said cheerfully. “Except for that last one. I suspect for that you just wanted to spend some quality time with your new guardian.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to connect to new family members, right Ginny?” Harry turned to the redhead.

She studiously ignored him, as she had been doing all summer. No matter though, they had a long train ride ahead of them and sooner or later, she’d have to talk to him – if only to hex him.

Sure enough the next few hours passed very quickly with Harry annoying everyone by ending everything he said with a ‘right Ginny?’, ‘what do you think, Ginny?’, or something else to that effect.

Then – just as the conductor made the announcement that they were nearing Hogwarts and might want to start changing – Ginny snapped, “Alright already, I’ll talk to you if you just shut up!”

Harry beamed. "Of course, I—" He broke off as Ginny glared pointedly at him and he mimed zipping his lips.

"Good," Ginny said, satisfied. "Now you boys get out of here; we need to change."

Obediently, the boys trudged out.

"Wow, you broke through the silent treatment through sheer annoyance," Ron said, sounding slightly awed.

"And it only took three months," Harry smiled self-deprecatingly.

"Don't feel bad, Harry," Neville said, patting him on the back. "It's not like you even saw her at all during most of June and all of July."

"You can come in now," Hermione said, opening the compartment door and slipping out, followed by the Ginny and Luna.

Once inside the compartment, Ron and Neville began pulling on their robes while Harry had a staring contest with Hedwig. He was fairly certain he would lose as he didn't think owls were actually capable of blinking, but then, you never knew. As he did so, it occurred to him that he and Sirius had completely forgotten to get Ron an owl to make up for the trauma of having to actually spend time with Peter Pettigrew. Not that Ron was likely to accept 'charity' or anything like that. Speaking of owls, though...

"Hey Ron, when did your sister get an owl?" Harry asked, turning automatically to look at his friend.

"...Yesterday. Remember? I wanted to know how she could afford that, even with the remainder of the Galleon Draw paying for our school supplies and she flew off the handle and asked if I was accusing her of being a thief and...well, it only went downhill from there," Ron recounted, a little sheepishly.

"Was this when you were shopping? Because remember, Sirius and I were committing various crimes then."

"There are ice cream crimes?" Neville asked innocently.

Harry made a face at him, then remembered that he was in the middle of a staring contest with his owl. "You blinked while I wasn't looking, didn't you?" he accused. Disgusted, he turned back towards his human companions. "What's her name, anyway?"

"Pigwidgeon," Ron said gloomily. Harry blinked, surprised by the coincidence, but then he remembered: Ginny had named Ron's owl last time, hadn't she? "And how do you not remember our fight? We were still having it at dinner last night until Mum threatened to hex us."

Harry tilted his head back, trying to remember. "Really? What was I doing at the time?"

"You, Fred, and George were giving Mrs. Weasley suggestions," Neville supplied helpfully.

"Oh, that's right! She never did take us up any of them, though..." Harry said.

There was a knock on the door. "Are you guys done in there?" Hermione called.

"Yep," Harry said, opening the door for the girls to file back in.

"Did an Umgubular Slashkilter eat your robes, Harry?" Luna inquired politely.

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Harry assured her. "I've just decided that wearing robes everywhere is a very sheep-like thing to do and so I'm not going to do so except when I'm in class."

"Are you even allowed to do that?" Hermione asked, skeptically.

Harry shrugged. "Who knows? Best case scenario: I'll lose us the House Cup this year."

"Don't you mean 'worst case scenario'?" Ginny asked.

Harry snorted. "Yes, Ginny. By 'best' I actually meant 'worst', how ever did you know?"

"Oh you know, I figured all those wrackspurts you and Luna are always talking about must have set up a colony in your head and so you get confused easily," Ginny replied easily.

"Thank you for being so understanding," Harry told her dryly.

"My pleasure," she replied sweetly.

Well, at least she was talking to him again.

--

It was, Harry decided as he helped himself to some mash potatoes, almost surreal to see Sirius sitting at the staff table. It was even stranger to see casually pointing his wand at Sirius's heart while he ate and Remus keep shooting guilty looks in Sirius's direction. They really should have guessed that Remus's failure to contact Sirius once he was officially pardoned and the real story came out would be to his far too well-developed guilty complex. It had been awhile since Harry had last seen the only competent and not evil DADA professor he'd ever had and so he could be wrong, but Harry was reasonably sure that Remus usually looked a good deal shabbier than he did then. Harry would have been thrilled to see him regardless as he had missed the man a great deal in the six years he'd been dead, but the sight of him in brand-new robes was...just bizarre. Perhaps Sirius would know more. He made a note to speak with his godfather after the feast.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts!" Dumbledore greeted them as he stood up. Instantly, the noisy Great Hall grew silent. "I have some staff changes to announce this year. Firstly, Professor Lupin has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Most people had no idea who Remus was, but once Harry started giving him a standing ovation, the rest of the school soon followed

suit. It looked like sheep mentality did come in handy sometimes after all. Remus looked astonished at the applause he was receiving and Snape's wand kept twitching towards Harry. Harry hid a smile. It looked like the presence of two Marauders was getting to him already and he idly wondered whether Sirius had done anything to him yet or if it was just Snape's well-deserved paranoia kicking in. After all, much as Harry loved Sirius now, when faced with the reminder of the boy Sirius had been at Hogwarts, he was forced to concede that they probably wouldn't have gotten along very well. After all, Sirius was violently anti-Slytherin while Harry rarely sought to provoke anyone as hostility found him often enough and Harry could never – not even as a first year – imagine being so irresponsible as to try to feed a classmate to a werewolf for the high crime of being annoying.

Once the applause had died down, Dumbledore continued, "As to our second new appointment, well I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Harry shot his friends a smug look (after all, they hadn't entirely believed him when he revealed Hagrid's new job to them the day before) before joining in with the rather tumultuous applause Hagrid was getting, even without him...encouraging his fellow students.

"We should have known," Ron said thoughtfully after the applause died down. "Who else would have set us a biting book?"

"But you did know!" Harry protested. "I told you yesterday."

"Like Ginny told you about her owl yesterday?" Neville asked pointedly.

"Touché," Harry acknowledged reluctantly.

"And now, for our final staff appointment I am sad to inform all of you that after his many years of quality teaching, Professor Binns has decided to seek out the afterlife and so History of Magic will now be

taught be none other than the recently pardoned Sirius Black," Dumbledore gestured to Sirius who – in keeping with his decision to pretend his prison stint had never happened – looked decidedly confused.

Sirius's standing ovation was lead by Harry, Luna, and the Weasley's (who had gotten to know him quite well during their month together in Egypt) and halfway through it, the applause was drowned out by fireworks that exploded and spelled out things like 'Return of the Marauders' and 'Chaos Galore'.

Harry actually had nothing to do with it, so it must have been all Sirius's doing. Remus, he noted, was looking nostalgic as he watched the fireworks, so there was progress being made on that front.

Even better, George Weasley fainted at the knowledge that one of his heroes had returned to the castle. Or he might have been testing one of his inventions; who really knew?

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"Why are you guys following me?" Harry asked Fred and George as he made his way to see Sirius.

"Good question, Harry," Fred responded jovially.

"Better questions: why did you not tell us that your godfather was one of THE Marauders?" George demanded.

"I guess it just slipped my mind," Harry replied honestly.

"Slipped your mind? Slipped your mind? How could it have slipped your mind?" Fred challenged.

"You knew they were our heroes!" George added.

Harry cocked his head. "Did you guys ever mention that?" he asked curiously.

"I...don't know," Fred confessed. "Fred?"

"I'm not sure, George," George replied. "But he should have known anyway!"

"Absolutely," Fred agreed.

"Well you know NOW," Harry pointed out. "My father was Prongs, Professor Lupin is Moony, Sirius is Padfoot, and if you mention Wormtail in front of Sirius, he will probably hex you."

"Professor Lupin?" Fred asked incredulously. "I guess he must not be as straight-laced as I thought."

"Oh no, he is," Harry assured him. "But he's still awesome, he just needs a little...encouragement, is all."

"Why shouldn't we talk about Wormtail?" George asked. "Who is he?"

"Peter Pettigrew," Harry said shortly. "So needless to say, that's kind of a sore subject right now."

The twins nodded solemnly as they reached the kitchen.

"Why are you meeting him here?" George asked.

"Are you meeting him in here?" Fred wanted to know. "Or are you just still hungry."

"Sirius and I like the kitchens; why not meet here?" Harry asked, tickling the painting of the pears.

As the portrait swung open, Harry heard someone who sounded suspiciously like Nymphadora Tonks complaining, "Oh come on, Sirius, do I have to spell it out for you?"

"You could do that," Sirius said cheerfully. "Or you could just tell me what you're talking about."

"Why am I even here?" Remus wondered.

"Because you love me and this is the first chance we've had to catch up seeing as how you've been avoiding me," Sirius reminded him.

"I have NOT been avoiding you, I just—Hello there," Remus greeted Harry and the twins. "May I help you?"

"Can we have your autograph?" George asked.

"And yours, too, Sirius," Fred added.

"Alright," Remus looked a little surprised, but signed the parchment he was given.

"Why do you want my autograph now?" Sirius asked. "I spent August with you guys."

"But we didn't know you were Padfoot, then," George explained.

"Should I be insulted that they didn't recognize me?" Sirius asked Harry, signing his name with a flourish.

"Nah, just blame the wrackspurts," he advised.

"Ah, yes, how could I forget about the dreaded wrackspurts," Sirius grinned.

"It's why they're so insidious," Harry explained. "So Tonks, what brings you here? Are you even allowed to be here?"

Tonks shrugged. "Don't know, don't care. And don't start preaching about how I should, because God knows students aren't allowed in the kitchens, anyway."

Harry sighed. "Fine, fine...But what are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for Sirius to acknowledge my existence," Tonks explained.

"What do you think I've BEEN doing?" Sirius asked. "I think arguing with you about whether or not I know what you're talking about is acknowledging your existence just fine."

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it!" Tonks complained.

It occurred to Harry suddenly what she was most likely talking about. "Sirius, you're the Head of the Black Family," he informed his godfather.

"...I know," came the confused reply. "What does that have to do with what we're talking about?"

"Did you ever get around to kicking Bellatrix out and reinstating Andromeda and Tonks?" Harry asked.

Sirius paused. "That did not occur to me, no. Now that you mention it, though, I will absolutely disinherit Bellatrix first thing tomorrow morning."

"...And?" Tonks prompted.

Sirius looked blank for a second. "And...then I don't have to worry about the likes of her tainting my admittedly Dark family reputation?"

"What about me?" Tonks asked.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll reinstate you and your mother, too," Sirius said dismissively.

"THANK YOU," Tonks said, looking anything but grateful.

Clearly concerned for his fellow Marauder's safety, Remus quickly jumped to his feet. "Now that that's settled, I'll escort you out."

Tonks smiled at him. "I'd like that," she said brightly, pleased at having achieved what she'd set out to do.

"We're going to head back to the Common Room, too," Fred announced.

"Don't stay down here too long; we talked to the House Elves into sending up food for our Back to School Party," George told him.

"Alright, I'll be there soon," Harry promised them. Once he and Sirius were the only humans left in the kitchen, Harry said, "We should make Remus and Tonks spend more time together; they're a really cute couple."

"I cannot believe the word 'cute' just came out of your mouth," Sirius said, horrified. "And why would I want to set Remus up to get—" he shuddered dramatically "- married?"

"Because at least Tonks isn't boring?" Harry suggested. "Besides, I miss my godson. Surely you can understand that."

"I suppose..." Sirius agreed reluctantly.

"Why wasn't Remus on the train this year?" Harry asked. "I looked for him, but I didn't see him."

"Harry," Sirius said in his best 'responsible adult' voice. "I'm not sure if you've realized this during the eight years you've attended Hogwarts, but the teachers don't actually ride the train with the students. In fact, the only adults on it are the snack cart lady and the conductor."

"I know that," Harry rolled his eyes. "Although, in retrospect, it is horribly irresponsible to allow the entire Hogwarts population to travel together unsupervised for several hours while able to use magic. Seriously, people could get seriously injured. I've seen people get seriously injured. Hell, I've both been the injurer and the injuree in that situation...Oh, and the reason I was asking was because last time Remus was in our compartment with us on the ride to school and saved us from a couple of over-eager Dementors."

Sirius thought about that for a moment. "Hm, well, last time I was a fugitive everyone thought was after you and there were crazed Dementors on the loose. This year, nothing really happened."

"I'm kind of surprised about that. I guess I expected Pettigrew to escape custody or else, well..." Harry trailed off, embarrassed.

Sirius laughed at that. "What, you expected ANOTHER prisoner to escape from Azkaban?"

"...maybe?"

"Do you have any idea how difficult it was for ME to do it? Besides, I only managed it because I wasn't crazy—" At this, Harry coughed pointedly, so Sirius quickly amended, "Well, not overly so at any rate. I was sort of sane and I was an unregistered animagus. Now, as you're an animagus yourself, you should know how difficult it is to become one and not every idiot is capable of becoming one. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if I was the only one in Azkaban. As far as Pettigrew is concerned...you, Ron, and Hermione were thirteen the first time that happened. Well, they were probably fourteen as it was the end of the year, but still! Ron had a broken leg, we had an unconscious Snape to deal with, Dementors attacked, and top it all off, Remus transformed. That was a very long string of bad luck on top of the fact that it didn't occur to any of us to simply stun him. Wormtail really is rather incompetent and as we got some competent people involved this time, there was no way he was going to be able to escape."

"I see," Harry said. "So if there isn't going to be a fugitive out to get me, what are we supposed to do all year? I...don't think I actually know how to handle having a school year without any mortal danger."

"I'm going to reconnect with Remus, you should 'get to know' him as well, I suppose we can have him and Tonks interact during holidays and any weekend she comes by to bother me, you can work on getting Ginny to at least like you, and I fully intend to drive Snape to the brink of madness," Sirius announced.

"Speaking of Remus, what's with his new robes? I've never seen him in anything new and...it's kind of freaking me out," Harry confided.

"Oh that," Sirius waved his concern away. "It would seem that Dobby accidentally replaced all of his second-hand things with brand new items after I may or may not have accidentally given him access to my Gringotts vaults and a galleon."

"How did he react?" Harry wanted to know.

Sirius shrugged. "Not well, but what can he do? His old junk is long gone by now. And like I told him, the recent fugitive and Azkaban escapee cannot possibly look better than the normal wizard with a badly behaved rabbit for at least six months."

"Which means at Christmas..." Harry trailed off.

"I'm going to blow everyone away," Sirius confirmed. "Of course, Snape laughed at that, but everyone knows that he's just jealous because he has notoriously poor hygiene."

"Does he?" Harry asked. "I always thought it was a result of working with so many potions."

"It is," Sirius nodded. "Well, partly. But there are potions that will counteract the effects of all those potion fumes. He just doesn't bother because his hygiene skills have never quite been up to par."

"Did you happen to tell him that? Because let me tell you, he looked rather homicidal at the feast tonight. What did you do to him?" Harry asked curiously.

Sirius smirked. "Nothing yet. It's going to take every ounce of my considerable self-control, but I want to wait until he's so paranoid he can't sleep before I start in on him."

"Spoken like a true Marauder," Harry grinned.

Sirius beamed with pride.

Review Please!

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

The next day at breakfast Harry was quietly bemoaning the fact that he'd taken three extra classes instead of two and how the extra homework would probably kill his social life while Ginny just rolled her eyes and told him she was sure he'd manage when Ron's voice broke through his sulking.

"Hermione," he was saying. "They've messed up your timetable. Look – they've got you down for about ten subjects a day. There isn't enough time. Look, see this morning? Nine o'clock, Divination. And underneath, nine o'clock Muggle Studies. And then nine o'clock Arithmancy! How the bloody hell do you think you'll manage that?"

"With a Time-Turner, of course," Harry piped up. "I got her one for...Christmas last year, maybe? I definitely got her one at some point. Besides, I have to use one to get to both Muggle Studies and Divination as it apparently never occurred to anyone that some people might want to take both."

"Harry!" Hermione hissed. "We're not supposed to tell people about that!"

"But I already explained all about them when I got you yours," Harry pointed out. "I am warning you now, though. If you don't throw a few extra hours in there to sleep and start going crazy and biting everyone's head off, I will be holding an intervention."

"Are you going to do that?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, no," Harry admitted. "But I have one extra class. You have, like, fifty."

"I do not!" Hermione huffed.

"How many classes are you taking?" Neville asked curiously.

Hermione just crossed her arms and glared at everyone.

“Besides,” Harry continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “while we all think time travel is really cool, who here would like to use it for the sole purpose of doing more schoolwork?”

Slowly, Percy raised his hand.

“Oh, you so don’t count,” Harry told him. “Besides, if you were any more responsible, you’d be on faculty.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Percy asked him delicately. “Since Professor Black’s appointment, I was under the impression that there was no such criterion to teach here.”

Harry shrugged. “Got me there.”

--

“Divination first, do you think?” Harry asked Hermione, who nodded and the pair followed Ron and Neville from the Great Hall. “My scar says it knows a short-cut and given that we’re finally taking a class that will be able to utilize its talents, I suggest we listen.”

“Why not?” Ron asked. “It’s not like we have any idea how to get there anyway.”

With Harry’s shortcut, the ten minute trip only took seven and all too soon Harry was getting that familiar perfume-induced headache that he really ought to have considered before willingly taking Divination again.

“Welcome,” Professor Trelawney said airily as she practically floated into the room. “How nice to see you in the physical world at last.” She launched into her spiel about the inner eye and Harry automatically tuned out as he’d already heard some variation of this several times before. “You, boy,” she stopped suddenly, pointing at Neville. “Is your grandmother well?”

Neville looked at her strangely. “She was yesterday,” he replied. “But at her age, who knows what various ailments may befall her?”

Trelawney nodded approvingly. "That's a good attitude to take, especially considering...Well, anyway we will be covering the basic methods of..."

"Especially considering what?" Neville whispered to Harry. "Is she for real? Does she know something?"

"I have no idea," Harry whispered back. "Maybe she'll catch a cold or break her ankle or something. Not like that's a big deal in the wizarding world."

"By the way, dear," Trelawney looked over at Parvati. "Beware a red-haired man. Are you even listening young man?" she asked, suddenly whirling to face Harry.

"Not really," Harry admitted. "But then, I'm sadly bereft of the Inner Eye. My scar's the one with all the talent and its paying plenty of attention. In fact, it said that there's going to be a Yule Ball next year and neither Parvati nor her sister should go with Ron because if they do he'll completely ignore them in favor of sulking because he accidentally insulted his crush in the process of asking her to go with him at the last minute and she was already going with a Quidditch Star."

"Harry!" Ron complained. "You're supposed to be on my side!"

"I am on your side," Harry told him. "Which is why I'll make sure to bug you to ask whoever you happen to like next year to the dance right away."

Their Professor, meanwhile, was eyeing Harry speculatively. "You just might succeed in this class," she said softly. "Being a Seer by proxy is completely unheard of, of course, but there are some...extenuating circumstances in your case and you having a direct, private link to a Seer is more than most people can hope for. Tell me, has your scar made any other predictions that have come true?"

Harry grinned. "My scar said you'd ask that and as such I've prepared a list." With that, he took out a piece of lined paper (to Hermione's consternation he and his Muggleborn clients were still using Muggle school supplies where they felt they would be more practical and the quill and parchment were the first to go, although it did cause some confusion when they were assigned a certain length essay and the professors just had to guess the equivalent in pages) that was covered in both sides in all the things he'd claimed his scar had predicted over the past two years.

"I see," Trelawney said, sounding impressed as she took the paper and placed it on her desk. She continued to outline the class to the students and Harry began playing Hangman with Ron. Since he couldn't possibly do that during History of Magic this year because he had a guardian to support, he figured he may as well get it out of the way now.

Harry looked up as Lavender walked by holding a large silver teapot and placed it on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

"Incidentally," the Professor said casually. "That thing you are dreading – it will happen on Friday the Sixteenth of October." She quickly explained their task for the day – tea-reading – and concluded with a warning to Neville, "After you've broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue patterned ones? I'm rather attached to the pink."

"You are so lucky," Ron said enviously. "I hate pink. Do you think if I break my teacup I can get blue, too?"

Neville just shrugged. "Hey Hermione, be my partner?"

"Sure thing, Neville," Hermione agreed absentmindedly as she took a sip of her tea. "This whole thing sounds very sketchy, don't you think? I mean it's all so vague! 'That thing you are dreading will happen Friday the Sixteenth of October'...it doesn't even say what it is that Lavender's supposed to be dreading and unless something happens to go wrong on that day, no one will even remember it!"

"Except you, probably," Ron murmured.

Neville snorted but wisely chose not to invoke Hermione's wrath by saying anything.

"Honestly," Hermione said, irritated. "Harry's 'scar' is usually more detailed than that!"

"To be fair," Harry said, hiding a smile. "My scar usually only shares its predictions about people I know well and Professor Trelawney just met us."

"And chances are that Lavender's going to be dreading quite a bit after a prediction like that," Neville added. "She and Parvati have always been pretty superstitious."

"Hmph!" Hermione frowned as she turned back to her tea.

"I'm done," Ron announced handing over his teacup to Harry.

"Hm," Harry peered into the cup, then quickly consulted his copy of *Unfogging the Future*. "I see...a circle, which it says represents a cycle beginning or ending and a rat, which I'm going to take to mean Wormtail so...you're going to make peace with the fact that Scabbers turned out to be a parent-betraying coward who attacked everyone last year, that's good. I also see a broom...you're either going to be travelling or play a lot of Quidditch."

"That sounds good to me," Ron said agreeably as he picked up Harry's cup. "My turn. Let's see...there's an acorn-thingy...it says that means 'a windfall, unexpected gold' which probably just means you have another money-making idea soon, wouldn't surprise me. And I also see...a dog? Hey Neville, does this look like a dog to you?"

"Let me see," Neville said reaching over to take the cup and accidentally knocking his own off the table in the process. "Whoops. I was supposed to get a blue one, right?"

"Eh, don't bother," Harry said, lazily waving his wand. The cup instantly repaired itself, though the tea dregs were still on the floor. "You might want to clean that up, though."

"Right," Neville nodded as stood to go find a dustpan. "Definitely a dog," he said as he paused to look at Harry's cup from over Ron's shoulder.

"Let's see...a dog is...a grim?" Hermione said as she checked the book. "Definitely a grim. Looks like you're going to die, Harry," she said casually.

"Your concern is touching, really," he replied sarcastically.

"Did someone say 'grim'?" Trelawney asked eagerly as she hurried towards them.

"Well, I might possibly have one," Harry conceded. "And I know it means 'impending doom', but it could just mean that someone's out to kill me...again. I don't really have anything planned out for this year, but I suppose it's possible someone might try. Or it might just be talking about my godfather."

Trelawney stared at him. "How could the grim represent your godfather? Do you think he is going to die?"

"He better not..." Harry said darkly. "But what I mean is, he's a dog animagus, looks just like that. There's also a key right by it, which means moving and since Sirius is now my official guardian and we spent all summer travelling, I have yet to move in with him."

"I see," Trelawney looked torn between disappointment that it looked like she wasn't going to be able to announce Harry's death after all and relief that she wouldn't be killing off such a promising seer. Even if it was only by proxy.

--

"Okay, you guys go ahead to Transfiguration; Harry and I will meet you there after Muggle Studies," Hermione instructed.

"Why can't you just come with us to Transfiguration and then rewind time to take Muggle Studies?" Ron whined, not happy at the thought

of trying to make his way from the North Tower to Transfiguration with only Neville to guide him.

"Because after Muggle Studies I still have Arithmancy and I don't trust Harry to have an entire class period free without managing to inspire chaos," Hermione shot back.

"So wait...we go to Muggle Studies together but then I have to make my way to Transfiguration alone?" Harry asked. "You trust me to do that?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I admit, the plan isn't perfect, but I'm sure you'll manage. Now let's GO!"

With that, the pair wet off down the hall. Once they reached the Muggle Studies classroom, they each took out their Time Turners and took themselves back to nine o'clock.

When they entered the classroom there were only five other students there: Terry Boot and Michael Corner from Ravenclaw, Susan Bones and Ernie MacMillan of Hufflepuff, and...oddly enough, Theodore Nott.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked in surprise as he sat in front of the sole Slytherin.

"Taking the class," came the terse reply.

"Can Slytherins do that?" Harry was incredulous.

"Only since Dumbledore became headmaster," Theodore said dryly.

Harry scratched his head in confusion. "But...why would you even want to take it? Isn't your father a Death Eater?"

Theodore glared at him. For some reason, he had never really liked Harry and had always acted like he was bothering him. Which he usually was. But still. "If my father were a Death Eater he'd be in Azkaban. As he is not, we can only conclude that he is not. He's the

one who encourage me to take this class, in fact. He had a...misunderstanding with a Muggle once and the girl shot him twice."

"Guns aren't legal in Britain," Hermione interjected.

"He was in Las Vegas," Theodore explained.

"Ah, Las Vegas," Harry said wistfully. "I've never been there, but I've heard some nice things."

"My father wants to make sure that I don't get killed because I know nothing about Muggles," Theodore concluded. "Also, he says the way people speak about them as if they are the sort of mythical creatures you'd find in the Quibbler to be embarrassing."

"That's quite a progressive attitude to take for a Pureblood Supremacist," Harry said admiringly.

"Who said we're Pureblood Supremacists?" Theodore challenged.

"In my experience, most Pureblood families remain so as they either know nothing or hate everything about Muggle," Harry answered.

"What about the Weasleys?" Hermione asked innocently.

Harry glanced over at her. "Have you heard about their squib second-cousin they like to pretend doesn't exist?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I mean, they claim it's just because he's nasty and resentful of their magic, but it's really a problem perpetuated by society: imagine, not too long ago Pureblood families imprisoned if not outright killed their squib children. Even those that weren't killed were often abandoned and some had their memories erased. Those that managed to escape that fate still weren't able to go to Hogwarts and often didn't receive a Muggle education and so when they became adults they didn't know how to become a member of the Muggle World and didn't fit in here either. Why do you think Filch is so bitter?" Harry asked rhetorically. "It's up to our generation to change things, though, and

chances are at least one of the seven Weasley's will marry a non-Pureblood."

Hermione stared at him the way she always did when he started getting serious. Fortunately, their professor chose that moment to enter the classroom, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt that said 'Cambridge' on it. Harry vaguely recognized her as Charity Burbage, a woman whose picture had been in the obituary edition of the Daily Prophet following the second Battle of Hogwarts.

"Welcome, class," she beamed at that. "My name is Professor Burbage and I am pleased that we have representatives from all four houses this year. Before we start, I'm going to need to gauge how much you already know about the Muggle world. For instance, raise your hand if you know what electricity is?"

Aside from Harry and Hermione, only Theodore Nott raised his hand. Hm, maybe he was serious about his dad wanting him to have a passing knowledge of Muggles. Interesting.

--

"How was Muggle Studies?" Neville asked as Harry flew into the Transfiguration classroom. "And don't worry, you're not late."

"Good," Harry sighed, relieved. "And it was interesting. I actually learned something!"

Neville raised his eyebrow skeptically.

"Well, not much," Harry admitted. "But considering I didn't think I'd learn anything, it was quite an accomplishment."

Hermione chose that moment to slip into the classroom and look around frantically to see if she was late.

"How was..." Ron paused, trying to remember what else she had taken already that morning. "Astronomy?"

"It was great," Hermione said, eyes glowing. "I'm going to have to put some real work in, but I think I'll learn a lot. And Muggle Studies was fascinating; Professor Burbage really knows what she's talking about."

"Attention class," McGonagall stood up and began a lecture on Animagi. The class listened with rapt interest while Harry doodled on Ron's textbook as he already felt he knew quite enough on the subject, being an Animagus himself. He only looked up once he heard the sound of applause and was just in time to see a tabby cat turn back into their Professor.

McGonagall smiled at the applause but then her eyes narrowed. "That's strange..."

"What's strange, Professor?" Hermione asked.

"I could have sworn you just came from Divination," she responded.

"We did," Ron piped up.

"Professor Trelawney usually predicts the death of one of her students and people usually take that rather seriously," McGonagall explained.

"She tried to predict Harry's death," Seamus volunteered. "But then they decided that the dog was probably Harry's godfather and moved on."

"Yeah," Dean chimed in. "She said that since Harry's psychic scar was dependent on Harry for survival, it would probably be able to take care of him."

McGonagall closed her eyes at the words 'psychic scar' and looked very much like Hermione did when they were being stupid and she was getting a headache. Finally, she said, "I'm glad to hear that none of you will be worrying about dying at any moment. Now, your assignment for today is to turn these rabbits," she gestured to her desk which had a large cage full of white rabbits, "into silk hats.

Points will, of course, be subtracted if the hats have fur, whiskers, or moves around and your instructions are on the board.”

After everyone had grabbed a rabbit and started attempting the transformation, McGonagall started walking around the classroom and observing everyone’s progress. When she got to Harry’s group, she frowned. Hermione had already managed to transfigure her rabbit perfectly, of course, and Ron and Neville were in the process of attempting to transfigure theirs, but Harry’s was still a rabbit, though it was dark grey.

“Mr. Potter,” McGonagall frowned. “You usually have yours done long before now. Are you having problems?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really; I’m just attempting to do this without a wand. Obviously, it’s a work in progress.”

The Professor’s frown deepened. “May I ask why you’re attempting to do this without your wand?”

“Because I already did it normally. See?” With that, he waved his wand and his nearly-black rabbit turned into a black hat. He waved it again and the hat turned back into a white rabbit. “Of course, now I have to start all over...” Harry lamented.

McGonagall just stared at him, shocked. “Did you just manage a silent transfiguration?”

Whoops. “...Yes?”

McGonagall looked a little teary-eyed and was probably caught up in memories of his father the transfiguration prodigy. “Carry on, Mr. Potter, carry on.”

“So...since you’re done, do you want to help me?” Ron asked hopefully.

Harry looked incredulously at him. “Done? I’ve got even less done than you! Ask Hermione.”

With that, Harry went back to work turning his rabbit black.

--

After lunch was Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid.

"You know," Draco said casually as they all opened their books to page 54, which was the start of the section on Hippogriffs. "If I hadn't done my own school supply shopping, I might never have known how to open these. Think how embarrassing it would have been to have had to tie a belt around the book because I didn't know we had to stroke it."

"But Draco," Harry retorted. "I paid Dobby do my shopping and I still know how to do it."

"Don't you have a psychic scar?" Draco asked. "I sort of think that's cheating."

"Meh," Harry shrugged.

Once Hagrid was done explaining about Hippogriffs, he asked for a volunteer. As expected, no one wanted to get near them until they were sure it was safe. It wasn't like they thought that Hagrid would purposely endanger them or anything, but what was considered 'safe' by a half-giant like Hagrid was a bit different from what was considered 'safe' for a bunch of thirteen-year-olds.

Naturally, then, the burden of volunteering fell on Harry. "I'll do it," he called cheerfully.

"Good man, Harry!" beamed Hagrid. "Right then – let's see how you get on with Buckbeak." With that he untied one of the chains and pulled Witherwings – Buckbeak now – out into the paddock.

Harry walked confidently towards the Hippogriff and bowed deeply, making sure not to blink as he did so. When he looked up, he saw Buckbeak bow just as deeply. It looked like Hagrid was right about confidence paying off when dealing with Hippogriffs. He slowly approached Buckbeak and started to stroke its beak.

"Well done, Harry!" cried an ecstatic Hagrid over the class' applause.
"Righ' then, Harry. I reckon he migh' let y eh ride him!"

Harry shrugged. "Sweet." He listened carefully to Hagrid's advice about mounting a Hippogriff and before he knew it he was flying around the Hogwarts grounds. It wasn't nearly as bad as he remembered, but broomsticks were still infinitely more comfortable. Especially the Firebolt 2000 he'd just gotten a few weeks before getting thrown into the past...

As Harry landed, he saw a bright flash and looked over to see Colin Creevey standing there with a camera. He got off of Buckbeak and went over to see what the second year wanted.

"I'm on my way to Herbology," Colin explained. "Do you think the Prophet would want this as a 'human interest' piece?"

Harry considered. "Probably. Especially considering this is Hagrid's first class after his record was expunged."

"Great," Colin beamed. "Expect it in the Prophet sometime next week. Bye Harry!"

"Later Colin," Harry waved back as he returned his attention to his class.

Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the Hippogriffs one by one, and soon people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock.

Harry quickly headed over to Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle, who had claimed Buckbeak. "Draco, if you ruin Hagrid's first class for him by insulting Buckbeak when he warned us repeatedly not to do that then I will officially start a rumor that your mother's not really a Black as your grandmother was cheating on your grandfather with Abraxas Malfoy and thus your parents are half-siblings."

Draco glowered at him and opened his mouth to protest.

“Don’t think I won’t,” Harry warned.

“Fine,” Draco glared as he stormed off to join Pansy and Millicent, Crabbe and Goyle at his heels.

So he may have pissed Draco off, but at least the rest of Hagrid’s class passed peacefully and non-violently.

Review please!

Chapter Thirty

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Now for part two of the ever-exciting classes chapter! I know, it's thrilling, isn't it? :p I am skipping Herbology, though, because quite frankly the teacher's kind of boring.

Harry wasn't quite sure what to expect when he walked into History of Magic. That was the only class in which he'd only ever had one teacher for his entire Hogwarts career as ghosts didn't need substitutes. One thing he did suspect was that falling asleep in Sirius's class would be a very bad idea.

Sure enough, Sirius started the class off with a warning against that very thing. "Hello, my name is Professor Black. I used to attend Hogwarts – Go Gryffindor! – and as such I had to endure my predecessor's teaching as well. Frankly, I don't think I was conscious for any of Professor Binns' lectures and I understand that many of you have had that same experience. If you want to fall asleep in my class, I will not stop you but know this: the charms that were mysteriously applied to my classroom recently could very well turn you blue, change your gender, make you unable to use the letter 'e', force you to speak in sonnets, or something else entirely that we haven't discovered, yet. For those of you who don't know how to compose a sonnet...well, you should have stayed awake. I also feel obliged to warn you that those unfortunate enough to disregard my warning found that the Hospital Wing was quite unable to help them out and they're just stuck the way they are for an entire week. Any questions before we begin?"

Immediately, there was a flurry of hands.

"Won't you get in trouble for hexing students?" Lavender wanted to know.

"I would," Sirius acknowledged. "It it were me who was hexing them and not my classroom."

"Why haven't you moved to a different classroom?" Seamus asked.

"I tried that with some fifth-year Hufflepuffs," Sirius replied. "It didn't work."

"What happened to Professor Binns?" Parvati asked.

"Professor McGonagall discovered signs of an exorcism in the castle while I was having my interview with the Headmaster and she quickly discovered that Professor Binns was the only ghost unaccounted for," Sirius explained.

"Why were you applying for a position that wasn't likely to vacate anytime soon?" Dean asked.

Sirius looked thoughtfully at him. "You're a Muggleborn, aren't you?"

Dean looked surprised and a little wary. "Yes, how did you know?"

Sirius laughed. "I could tell by all the valid questions; you tend to get those more with people less affiliated with the wizarding world. And I was applying because I was hoping that the Headmaster would rather have a live teacher than a ghost. The fact I was there when the exorcism was discovered was just good timing."

"How did you escape from Azkaban?" Ron asked.

Sirius stiffened. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, young man. I've never been to Azkaban in my life and I challenge you to find any legal documentation that says otherwise."

"Then where were you for most of my life?" Harry piped up, just to be annoying.

"Majorca," Sirius lied easily.

"And yet you abandoned me to my magic-hating relatives?" Harry asked, sounding horrified.

"Hey, I got you a Firebolt, didn't I? What more do you want?" Sirius demanded, crossing his arms.

"Is the curse just if we fall asleep or is it also if we're not paying attention?" Neville asked.

"No idea," came Sirius's reply. "But do you really want to be letting your guard down in a room that hexes sleeping people?"

"Point," Neville admitted.

"Are you going to be falling Professor Binns' curriculum?" Hermione asked naively.

"Nope," Sirius said cheerfully. "All you need to know about the Goblin Rebellions for now is that they keep happening because Goblins have a bloodthirsty nature and Wizards keep trying to subjugate them, such as the Wand Ban of 1631 which prohibited any magic creatures other than witches and wizards from using wands, although that was probably a reaction to the 1612 Goblin Rebellion that took place in Hogsmeade...Be careful of Goblins, kids. They are intelligent, ruthless, and control the money supply."

The students stared at him; that was the first mildly interesting any of them had ever heard about Goblins and they were a bit concerned about what might happen to the economy in the event of another Goblin Rebellion.

"But enough about that; we can cover Goblins when we get nearer to OWLs. Instead, let's talk about Voldemort," Sirius announced.

Immediately, the room was filled with gasps and shudders.

"Are you guys for real?" Sirius asked in disbelief.

Harry quite understood his astonishment. While it was understandable that people had been afraid to use the appellation of 'Voldemort' at the height of his power, twelve years had passed since then and no one except Harry knew what a world where Voldemort was running wild was like so why in the world were they acting so terrified? Harry had more-or-less gotten used to everyone's paranoia, but Sirius had been thrown into Azkaban the minute Voldemort died-

ish and had been a fugitive and and/or surrounded by people who actually knew full well the horror Voldemort's reign wrought.

"Tell you what," Sirius decided."Anyone who can use the word 'Voldemort' in a sentence in front of me without twitching, stuttering, or turning pale gets 50 points and I'll agree to 'supervise' one of their detentions. Now, to make a note to tell my other classes..." he muttered, turning to the chalkboard and writing 'VOLDEMORT' in all capitals across the top.

"So we're learning about Voldemort?" Hermione asked immediately.

"We really don't have many facts about Voldemort," Neville chimed in. "Just myths and legends."

Sirius grinned. "100 points to Gryffindor."

"Great," Harry groaned. "Not only does my godfather apparently hate me, but two of my best friends do, too."

"Don't worry, Harry," Ron tried to reassure him. "It's not like I'm going to say it."

"Maybe not now," Harry conceded. "But all things considered, I think we're going to be spending quite a bit of time on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"Why are you calling Voldemort that?" Hermione asked, curiously. "You never do that."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Harry replied seriously.

"Now, to cement my place on the hit list of any self-respecting death eater – that is, if there were any – I'm going to begin by telling you that 'Lord Voldemort' is an alias for one Tom Marvolo Riddle. Fun fact: if you rearrange the letters of 'Tom Marvolo Riddle' you get the words 'I am Lord Voldemort.' So basically the most feared name around is actually just the posturing of a bored teenager who really got lucky that 'Voldemort' means 'flight from death' in French," Sirius

said brightly. "Also, Riddle was a half-blood who had daddy issues because his mother, a Pureblood by the name of Merope Gaunt and who was one of Salazar Slytherin's only heirs, married a Muggle also named Tom Riddle after dosing him with a love potion. Merope Gaunt eventually deluded herself that her little love slave was really in love with her and stopped feeding him the potion. He immediately left her and their unborn child and went home. There's a lesson to be learned from all this. Can anyone tell me what that is?"

"Don't assume the guy your feeding love potions is in love with you and stop?" Lavender suggested.

Seamus blanched and slowly started inching away from her.

Sirius stared at her. "I was actually going to say 'Don't drug people with a love potion' or 'always tell your significant other that you are a witch or wizard before the wedding/a child is conceived in case they don't handle it well so you can Obliviate them and move on', but that was a good – if creepy – guess. Now, once Riddle left Gaunt lost the will to live, peddled her possessions, gave birth at an orphanage and died. Little Riddle resented being abandoned by his father and this may have played a part in his strong anti-Muggle sentiments. Additionally, Gaunt's father and brother also passed away, leaving Riddle the only remaining Heir of Slytherin."

"Does that mean that he opened the Chamber of Secrets 50 years ago?" Dean asked.

Sirius nodded. "Yes, he did and he killed a fellow student of his who many of you may know as 'Moaning Myrtle' from Ravenclaw. Now, does anyone have any questions?"

Once again, there was a flurry of hands.

--

When Harry got to Potions, Snape was nowhere to be found. Lockhart, however, was standing behind Snape's desk, scowling something fierce.

"Professor Lockhart?" Harry asked, somewhat tentatively. "What are you doing here?"

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your cheek, Potter," Lockhart said curtly.

Harry was puzzled for a moment before the truth dawned on him.
"Professor Snape?"

"Ten more points for pointing out the obvious, Potter."

As pleased as Harry was to counteract Hermione and Neville's huge point draw for saying 'Voldemort', he knew that to lose twenty points for very little in reason in less than a minute meant that Snape must be pissed. Clearly Snape's current...predicament...was Sirius's all fault. He was almost glad that Sirius had finally gone ahead and done something; he was getting worried.

"What's Lockhart doing here?" Neville asked quietly as they started working on their Shrinking Solutions.

"It's not really him, it's Snape," Harry whispered back. "I think Sirius pranked him."

"...why?"

"They haven't let go of their Hogwarts rivalry," Harry explained. "Of course, in Snape's defense – and I can't believe I just said that – Sirius did bully him mercilessly for years, helped drive away his only friend, and nearly killed him because Sirius really hates Slytherins. Of course, Snape used to be a Death Eater, so maybe that's a reason Sirius is still upset..."

"And so your godfather is still attacking him now? That's...kind of pathetic," Neville admitted.

Harry shrugged. "Eh, he ate rats for me. I say let him have his fun."

"Are you two chatting or working?" Snape demanded, storming over. "Longbottom, how on God's green Earth did you manage to turn your Shrinking Solution orange?"

Neville glanced down at his potion, which was indeed orange. "Huh, what do you know? It is orange. Isn't it supposed to be green?"

"Indeed," Snape sneered. The effect was kind of ruined by the fact that he still looked and sounded like Lockhart, though, and in fact it was rather comical. "Longbottom, at the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly."

"Alright," Neville nodded before knocking his cauldron over.

Snape looked murderous. "DETENTION!"

After he stormed away, Neville murmured, "It's a good thing Professor Black volunteered to supervise my next detention..."

"Why'd you knock your potion over, Neville?" Hermione asked, shocked. "Now you'll have to start over!"

Neville shrugged. "Better that than risking poor Trevor. You'll help me with the next one, won't you? He might still want to do it."

"Fine," Hermione agreed reluctantly, not wanting any harm to befall Neville's toad and knowing that Potions would never be Neville's strong suit.

"Is Trevor even down here?" Harry inquired.

Ron snorted. "You think that will stop him? Nice job, by the way, Neville. That was awesome!"

"Thanks," Neville smiled. He'd really come a long way.

--

Harry was really looking forward to his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson with a teacher that wasn't either a fraud or evil. Or Snape. Although given the fact he pretended to be a loyal death eater and the fact that he'd just tried to kill Trevor, both of those points were debatable.

He remembered that the first lesson was on Boggarts and that it was in the staff room, but he was still a little thrown off to see Snape, still looking like Lockhart, waiting for them. And he had to be waiting for them or else he would have put up more of a fuss about leaving or the third year Gryffindors' presence.

"Possibly no one's told you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you to be on your guard as he has spent far too much time with Harry Potter and is liable to cause wanton destruction at the slightest provocation."

Neville glared defiantly at Snape but said nothing, not wanting to push his luck.

"I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation," Remus said casually. "I'm sure he will perform it with minimal collateral damage."

Neville looked pleased while Snape amused Harry further by showing him how Lockhart would look curling his lip in disgust before leaving.

"Have you spotted it, Harry?" Remus's voice broke through Harry's mental replaying of how hilarious Snape was when he looked like Lockhart.

"Spotted what?" Harry asked automatically.

"What advantage do we have over the Boggart?" Remus repeated.

"We can neutralize its effectiveness by waving our wands, thinking of something amusing, and saying 'Riddikulus'?" Harry guessed.

Remus frowned. "I was actually going to say 'because trying to frighten multiple people will confuse it and it won't know what form to

take', but I suppose that is another advantage. Let's practice the charm without our wands first. After me, please...riddikulus!"

Finally, Remus was satisfied that they had the spell down. "Right, Neville. First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?"

"The thought of Harry as Minister of Magic," Neville replied immediately.

"Hey!" Harry protested while the rest of the class laughed.

"Harry as Minister of Magic...hmmm...Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?"

"Sure do," Neville said cheerfully. "But she'd be just as scary as Minister, though obviously for different reasons."

"No, no, you misunderstand me," Remus explained. "I wonder, could you tell me what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?"

Harry was starting to get a bad feeling about this...

Sure enough, two minutes later an older-looking Harry stepped out of the wardrobe, beaming. "You know," Boggart-Harry said. "Monday is probably the most depressing day ever, let's cancel it. And what's this nonsense about not being able to own a dragon in Britain? I say we give one to anyone with a license. Oh! And we can add a dragon tax to the Pureblood tax! And how did the ghost community respond to my decree to allow Sir Nicholas into the Headless Hunt? I-"

"RIDDIKULUS!" Neville shouted, desperately.

Instantly, Harry was in drag. He didn't think the sight of him wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress, a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and swing a huge crimson handbag from his hand was very funny, but apparently the rest of the class disagreed as they were in stitches.

Harry, annoyed by the image and wanting a chance to face the Boggart and knowing that Remus wouldn't be inclined to let him, raced forward. There was a crack and – to Harry's surprise – instead of a Dementor there was a flash of bright green light.

The Killing Curse, Harry realized even as he raised his wand and cried, "Riddikulus!"

As the Avada Kedavra turned into a light show, Harry mused that he really needn't have bothered as his classmates seemed to find his fear of 'green light' hysterical.

"Seriously, Harry? Green Light?" Ron asked through his laughter.

"It was the Killing Curse!" Harry insisted. "I don't want the people I care about to die!"

"I'm sure it is, Harry," Hermione tried to console him but she couldn't keep a straight face.

"Fine," Harry crossed his arms. "Why don't you try it?"

"Maybe I will," Hermione declared before stepping up the Boggart.

There was another crack and McGonagall was standing there, looking disappointed. "I don't know what to say, Ms. Granger. You had so much potential...or at least I thought you did. Now, I don't know what to think. You've failed. Everything. We've never had a student fail everything before and so we're kicking you out of Hogwarts!"

Hermione screamed.

"Hermione," Ron ran up to her. "It's just a Boggart, remember? This isn't real. Imagine...imagine she can only speak in sonnets like Professor Black said!"

Hermione closed her eyes and, voice shaking, shouted, "R-Riddikulus!"

For a moment, nothing happened, then McGonagall continued her rant Shakespeare-style.

“Miss Granger, I just don’t know what to say

You’ve failed everything and that is the truth

Now you must leave Hogwarts at once today

Education is wasted on you youth

“You’re a disappointment and a disgrace

No one’s ever failed everything before

How dare you even stay and show your face

Foolish girl, hurry and run out the door

“Honestly, you’re better off a Muggle

Of course you are clearly so very dim

That even that will end up a struggle

I’m telling you now your future is grim

“This is really for your own good, my dear

That I’m now throwing you out on your rear.”

Ron smiled reassuringly at Hermione before he stepped up to face the Boggart.

Crack! McGonagall turned into a six-foot-tall spider covered in hair and clicking its pincers menacingly.

“Riddikulus!” Ron yelled after only a moment’s hesitation.

The Spider’s legs vanished and the Boggart rolled Lavender’s way.

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione said quietly as they watched their classmates deal with the Boggart.

"Don't worry about it," Ron told her. "Seriously, don't. You're brilliant. You're the smartest person I know, except for Dumbledore and sometimes Harry. They would never throw you out."

"Let's give them a moment, shall we?" Harry suggested, pulling Neville off to the side.

"Neville, finish it!" Remus called.

Neville stepped up to the Boggart and it turned back into Minister Harry. "Riddikulus!"

The minute that Boggart was in a dress, there was a loud flash.

Harry spun around and groaned when he saw Draco Malfoy standing at the door, holding a camera.

Draco grinned. "Payback's a bitch, Potter."

Note: I think Hermione's reaction seems a little extreme, but considering in the actual Book 3 she was willing to leave in the middle of the exam because she couldn't handle McGonagall telling her she failed everything, it should be in character. Also, I've never taken a class on poetry and as such had to look up how to do sonnets online. I completely ignored the part about iambic pentameter because that seems like it would take far too much time. Maybe Hermione's not an expert on sonnets either and thought what the Boggart was saying was close enough.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-One

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: You know what's really annoying? People complaining about things in a story that aren't actually in there. For instance, Harry being a pedophile by immediately going out with the girl of his choice even though he's mentally older. 'Oh, you mean Harry was married? Clearly he wants want to molest poor ten-year-old Ginny!' I think there's almost a ridiculous lack of romance in this story right now and Harry is well aware of the squick issues. And Hermione must be receiving favoritism because in some of the first chapters she picked up on a little innuendo the others didn't get because she's intelligent and didn't fear saying 'Voldemort' during the first week of school when she probably had never heard anyone tell her not to say it? And STOPPING reading a story because you hate the word 'emo'? I mean, I understand stopping if you hate the plot, characterizations, pairing...but one word? Sorry for the mini-rant, but it was quite distracting as I got that when I was trying to write this...

It occurred to Harry later that he really could have handled the picture situation a lot better than he did. For instance, he could have blown the camera up, petrified Draco, used a switching spell, summoned it...basically anything but what he did, which was absolutely nothing. Draco, on the other hand, sent the photo of the Boggart straight to Rita Skeeter, who wrote "Dungeons and Drag: The Secret Life of Harry Potter" which wasn't just an article, but a series of articles. Harry, naturally, had responded by suing for libel and won, forcing the Daily Prophet to print a retraction. The Wizarding World at large seemed to have forgotten about it by early October but the Hogwarts students...

"Hey Harry," Lisa Turpin, a Ravenclaw from his year, greeted him. "I was wondering if you could sign my new Harry-in-drag wall scroll?"

"Draco's selling wall scrolls now?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Oh yeah," Lisa nodded enthusiastically. "He said he got the idea from you and your incessant merchandizing you've been doing since last year."

“Damn him,” Harry muttered, wondering whether he should drop that Narcissa-the-secret-Malfoy rumor after all or whether he really deserved this for the widely-accepted Snape-as-Draco’s-father story he created. In fact, Sirius said that just last week Snape had gotten a letter from a lawyer offering to help him sue for partial custody of Draco. Needless to say, the Potions Master was not amused. Fortunately, he’d been riding so high ever since Rita Skeeter’s first article came out that this new drop in mood just meant he was pretty much back to normal.

“So...will you?” Lisa asked again.

“Oh, fine whatever,” Harry sighed as he took out his decidedly Muggle pen and quickly signed it.

“Thanks, Harry, you’re a good sport,” Lisa said cheerfully as she hurried away.

“Do you think I can persuade you to sign them before I sell them?” Draco’s voice came from behind him. Harry turned around to watch the Slytherin staring at him with obvious amusement. “It would probably be worth more.”

“Would I get a cut in the profits?” Harry asked automatically.

“Ten percent,” Draco offered.

“Twenty,” Harry countered.

“Fifteen,” Draco compromised.

“Deal,” Harry smiled. “Now you’ve got to tell me: why in the world were you in the teacher’s lounge that day? I mean, were you stalking me or something? Or do you just take pictures of Hogwarts in your spare time?”

“I ran into Professor Snape a little after Potion’s class,” Draco explained. “He told me to get a camera and hurry to the teacher’s lounge. I didn’t have one, so I had to borrow Pansy’s-”

"Pansy has a camera?" Harry interrupted. "I thought that was only Colin."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Pansy has apparently decided to follow your entrepreneurial example and has taken it upon herself to write a book for parents and new students (particularly Muggleborns) about what to expect, what the castle's like and the classes and she's including a lot of pictures."

"Man, I wish I thought of that..." Harry trailed off. "But wait...both of your families are ridiculously wealthy. Why would you even need to make money?"

"Why would you?" Draco shot back. "You're independently wealthy as well."

"Yeah, but you guys don't throw around money like I do and your parents are still around to find ways to accumulate more wealth," Harry pointed out.

Draco shrugged. "What can I say, Potter? It's nice to have some readily available cash without needing to go through your parents and Hogwarts can be really boring. But like I was saying, Professor Snape told me to go to the teacher's lounge and I suppose he thought I could get a picture of your worst fear or you looking terrified, but this worked out so much better, don't you think?"

"For you, maybe," Harry muttered.

Draco just smirked and walked away.

--
As Harry waited impatiently for the line to leave the Castle and go to Hogsmeade to shorten, he noticed a disturbance at the beginning of the line. Upon closer examination, it appeared that Lavender was crying and Parvati, Seamus, and Dean were attempting to comfort her.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked as he, Ron, Neville, and Hermione approached them.

"She got a letter from home this morning," Parvati whispered. "It's her rabbit, Binky. He's been killed by a fox."

"Oh," Hermione said. "I'm so sorry, Lavender."

"I should have known," Lavender angsted. "You know what day it is?"

"The Sixteenth of October?" Neville helpfully supplied. "The day that Professor Trelawney said something bad would happen to you?"

Lavender nodded and sighed tragically. "And not just that: I also got my period today!"

"You know what?" Harry said, feeling uncomfortable. "I think I forgot my money in my room. Coming Ron? Neville?"

"Dear God, yes," Ron said, practically pushing Harry towards the Gryffindor tower.

"We'll go with you!" Dean jumped in.

"Oh yeah, I think I forgot something as well..." Seamus said.

The moment the five boys were out of sight, they hid behind a wall.

"Psst, Ginny," Harry called out as he saw the girl in question walking by.

"What are you guys doing?" she asked, walking up to them.

"We're hiding from Lavender because she's talking to Parvati and Hermione about 'girl things,'" Harry explained.

"And so you're hiding," Ginny said, shaking her head in disgust. "Boys. What do you want me to do? Let you know when it's safe to come out?"

"That would be great," Harry nodded.

"Alright," Ginny agreed. "If you buy me a box of Honeydukes Chocolate."

"Hell, if you let us know when they leave so we can avoid them for the rest of the day, I'll buy you five."

Ginny smiled at the thought and, after a few more minutes passed by, let them know it was safe to go.

"Thanks Ginny, you're a lifesaver," Harry said gratefully as they got back in line.

"With the kind of heroics you get up to, it doesn't surprise me that you would think that," Ginny replied idly.

--

Since Hagrid's first lesson was such a resounding success (even if it did ultimately result in Draco's photo revenge that he was still milking for all its worth) he continued showing them exciting and rather dangerous creatures. Fortunately, Hermione managed to convince him to let them know in advance what they were going to be studying and everyone always made sure to be well-prepared as doing otherwise could easily land them in the Hospital Wing.

Potions was much the same as it had always been, with the exception that Neville was not putting a lot more effort into a class he knew he wasn't good at because he was worried that Snape would try to poison Trevor again with his potions if he screwed them up.

Professor Trelawney seemed convinced that Harry – or rather, his facial disfigurement – was a true prodigy and often let him off with less homework as he apparently did not need the extra help to establish his connection to his inner eye since he was already using it on a regular basis. Vaguely, Harry tried to remember the first time he'd used his scar excuse. He was fairly certain it was only supposed to be a one-time thing so he could do whatever he wanted/needed to do without having to bother with explanations for his future knowledge

but somehow...well it was convenient. And he thought maybe the first time he bothered with that was when he went off to go blow Voldemort's cover his first year.

Sirius and Remus – both interesting if unorthodox teachers – had begun competing to see which class the students preferred. Sirius, of course, always had amusing lectures and answered whatever question anyone threw at him but Remus kept bringing in nice and non-lethal dark creatures. The end result, of course, was that History of Magic and Defense Against the Dark Arts were both more exciting than they'd been in years. Or possibly ever as Fred and George kept insisting that Binns had actually been hired by the Founders of Hogwarts themselves. Of course, that was highly unlikely, but since when had that ever stopped the rumor mill?

"Harry," Sirius's voice jolted him out of his thoughts.

"Yeah?" Harry asked.

"I couldn't help but notice that you received a postcard this morning, read it, set it on fire, then tried to set the ashes on fire. Care to tell me what that's all about?" Sirius sounded rather amused.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Lockhart wrote to say his new book's done, he's dedicating it to me, and to remember that 'there's no such thing as bad publicity.'"

Sirius laughed. "Well, for a man who's determined to make people remember him, I guess there wouldn't be. Is this about the posters?"

"Of course it's about the posters," Harry snapped. "Draco sells them to whoever walks by and yet has somehow managed to convince people that they're a collector's item. Are people really that stupid?"

"Do I really need to answer that?" Sirius asked rhetorically.

"Since when is Draco so good at this kind of thing, anyway?" Harry complained.

"That's just what you get for pissing off Narcissa," Sirius commiserated. "She is a scary, scary lady. How do you think Lucius managed to stay out of Azkaban? Besides, this will all blow over soon enough. It's not that funny."

Strangely enough, Harry didn't look comforted. "You have three hanging in your classroom!"

Sirius was unrepentant. "They're some of my only pictures of you, seeing as how I so cruelly abandoned you for most of your life..."

"I knew that was going to come back and haunt me sooner or later," Harry grumbled.

"Cheer up; I'm off to go plot revenge against Snivelly with Remus," Sirius said cheerfully. "Want to come?"

"Eh, why not?" Harry agreed as they set off to find the werewolf in question.

"Remus, are you busy?" Sirius asked, barging right in to Remus's office.

"Incredibly so, Sirius," Remus answered without looking up. "Two of the third year's Care of Magical Creatures textbooks attempted to eat their homework and I'm trying to decipher it."

"Wow," Harry remarked. "'My book ate my homework.' I don't think I've heard that one before."

"Hello, Harry," Remus greeted. "Do you need something?"

"Oh, so you have time for him but not for me?" Sirius asked, wounded.

"He's a student, Sirius, that makes him my responsibility," Remus explained patiently.

"Do you have a way for everyone to have completely forgotten all about Neville's stupid Boggart?" Harry asked.

"Nothing legal," came Remus's simple reply.

"Now that we're all here, let the weekly meeting of the 'Drive Snivelly to the Brink of Insanity' come to order," Sirius said grandly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "DSBI?"

"It's better than SPEW," Sirius said defiantly.

"I told you, Sirius, I'm not going to help you. I'm—" Remus began.

"An adult? Responsible? Not holding a decade-long grudge?" Harry supplied helpfully.

"Yes. To all of those things," Remus agreed.

Sirius shot them a withering look. "Oh shut up. Now, since we last met that git did conspire to turn me into a Veela. Fortunately, the effect wore off at 48 hours because most of my new fangirls were underage. In return, I may have turned his nose into a beak and enchanted every reflective surface he came across to give him hygiene tips. This was all very good but now there is a new week, so we need a new plan!" Sirius waited for a moment, but Harry and Remus stayed silent. "Well?"

"You told us to shut up," Remus said mildly as Harry tried to see if he could read Remus's paperwork upside-down.

"I didn't actually expect you to listen," Sirius said impatiently. "So...ideas?"

"You could decorate his classroom with pictures of yourself in drag," Harry muttered.

"I don't quite think that would have the desired effect," Sirius said, writing it down anyway. "Remus?"

"You could try acting like a responsible member of society and not reviving this petty rivalry," Remus suggested.

Sirius just stared at him. "Wow. You are REALLY bad at this. I'm never leaving you alone for twelve years again."

"Whatever makes you happy, Sirius," Remus said serenely.

"That's a good philosophy," Sirius smiled. "I think more people should adopt it."

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Two

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Thanks for the outpouring of support! It really made my day.

"What do you mean we're playing Hufflepuff instead of Slytherin tomorrow?" Harry asked incredulously. "Draco's not sick or injured or anything!"

Oliver Wood coughed. "Actually, my sources tell me that he 'accidentally' cast a reducto on his wrist and since Madam Pomfrey has to regrow several of his bones, he won't be in any shape for the match tomorrow."

"Wow," Harry said almost admiringly. "That...that's dedication. Completely stupid since it's only a little rain and we'll be similarly hampered, but still...Have you ever had all your bones regrown? The fact he'd do that on purpose...Just wow..."

"I know," Wood reluctantly agreed. "If it weren't for the fact that I don't want all of our multi-weather training to be for nothing, I'd suggest you do the same thing."

"...Gotta go," Harry said, sprinting for the relative safety of his Defense Against the Dark Arts class. "Sorry I'm late, Professor Lupin. I was dealing with a Quidditch fanatic and these things take time."

"This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we'll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down," Remus said coldly.

Harry brightened as he always did at the rare chance to lose house points. "So...that's a point a minute?"

Remus nodded uncertainly.

"So can I use come back in an hour or so? Or hell, Monday? How many points would that be..." Harry trailed off, trying to figure it out.

Remus's lips curled into an unpleasant smile. "Tempting as that may be, I have no inclination to spend time with you outside of class supervising your detention and if I don't then God knows your godfather will probably spend the time taking you to the kitchens or Hogsmeade or something."

"True," Harry conceded. "Are you feeling alright? I mean, you're acting kind of...Oh my God, isn't tonight the-"

"Indeed it is," Remus confirmed, irritated.

"...So you're Professor Snape who my godfather made look like Professor Lupin for whatever reason?" Harry hazarded a guess.

"He thought it would be an 'easier transition' for the students," Snape confirmed dourly. "Now sit down."

"As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any records of the topics you have covered so far-" Snape began before Harry interrupted him yet again.

"I have no idea what we're on, but since there isn't any lesson plan, can we take the time to learn about werewolves?"

Snape's eyes widened. "That's an interesting request, Potter. Any particular reason?"

Harry knew Snape was surprised as the older man was obviously half-heartedly trying to get someone to realize about Remus because he was annoyed at having to fill in and because Remus hadn't done anything to stop Sirius acting like a prat and pranking him regularly. Not like Snape wasn't giving as good as he got, but... And it wasn't as if Snape wasn't totally planning on covering it anyway, so why not?

"The widespread ignorance about lycanthropy is appalling. Did you know that people actually believe that werewolves live in the Forbidden Forest and you can run into one at any time or that it's possible to raise a 'werewolf cub' as if it were a pet?" Harry shook his head sadly. "As any Muggle could tell you, werewolves only transform on the full moon."

"But Harry," Hermione protested. "We were about to start hinkypunks!"

"If Professor Lupin wanted you to start hinkypunks today then he should have left a lesson plan," Snape pointed out. "I cannot believe I'm about to say this but...Potter's idea has merit. It is truly a sad state of affairs when Muggles know more about magical creatures than wizards do."

"Let's start with an easy question," Snape said. "Can any of you other than Miss Granger who has most likely memorized the textbook tell me how you distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?"

Dean Thomas, bolstered by the fact that as a Muggleborn he at least understood about the full moon, made use of that fact. "A true wolf is around as a wolf all the time versus the once-a-month werewolf?"

"Anything that we haven't already said?" Snape tried again.

"If we get close enough to see the difference, then doesn't that mean that if it's a werewolf we're screwed anyway?" Harry asked innocently.

"POTTER!" yelled Snape.

"Oh, right, I memorized the textbook. Sorry," Harry apologized.

When no other answers were forthcoming, Snape tutted softly. "I never thought I'd meet a third-year class who wouldn't even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. Even Lockhart got that across in his book on Werewolves..."

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"I'm just saying, I don't think I can ever forgive you," Harry said solemnly.

"I said I was sorry!" Cedric insisted. "And it's not like I knew."

"You should have," Harry crossed his arms sullenly. "I mean, for the love of God! Dementors come out of nowhere and swarm the field and I heroically save everyone by casting a kick-ass Patronus and the next thing I knew you had caught the Snitch!"

"I didn't notice they were there," Cedric tried to explain.

"How could you not notice?" Harry asked skeptically.

"There was very poor visibility," Cedric defended.

Harry just stared. "But didn't you wonder about the sudden feeling of hopelessness?"

"I thought it was because you guys were 50 points ahead and the storm was only getting worse," said Cedric.

"Fine, stick to your story. But you and I both know the truth!" Harry said dramatically.

"Yes, and so does everyone else," Cedric said slowly, trying to keep calm.

"Here are your winnings, Harry," Luna arrived, Ginny trailing along behind her.

"Winnings?" Cedric asked, surprised. "But you lost the match."

"Harry made Luna bet that he would lose the match due to Dementor intervention and the students – who really should know better than to take a seemingly ridiculous bet from Harry by now – just lost quite a bit of money," Ginny explained.

"Why didn't you do it yourself instead of using a proxy?" Cedric inquired.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Please. The minute I bet against Gryffindor, they'll accuse me of throwing the match."

"But...there were Dementors," Cedric pointed out.

"They would probably accuse Harry of bringing them," Luna said. "I still don't quite understand why Dementors are so pro-Hufflepuff though. I should write an article about it..."

"You should," Harry agreed. "I'll help. So Ginny, since I just heroically saved everyone, does that mean my hero street cred just rose?"

"It might," Ginny said thoughtfully. "If it weren't for the fact that the teachers can probably produce a Patronus as well and you made a lot of money on this."

Harry decided to take the opportunity to be melodramatic. "Why do you hate me when all I give you is love?"

Ginny just rolled her eyes. "Why would you bet on something so ridiculous anyway?"

"My scar told me to," Harry explained.

"Your scar knew there would be Dementors," Ginny repeated.

"No idea, I didn't ask," Harry said breezily.

"Then why'd you do it?" Ginny demanded.

"Because I have money to burn?" Harry guessed.

"Why me?" Ginny asked, annoyed.

"Would you mind if I interviewed you for the Quibbler?" Luna asked Cedric.

The Hufflepuff looked surprised. "I guess not. Why, though?"

"It's part of my investigation," Luna told him. "A good reporter never goes into a story with any assumptions so I need to determine if the Dementors were really supporting Hufflepuff in general or if they just like you."

"You think the Dementors like me?" Cedric repeated. "Is that...good?"

"Oh no," Luna shook her head vehemently. "If they like you then they want to take your soul. If you cannot already produce a corporal Patronus like Harry then I recommend you ask Professor Lupin to teach you."

Cedric nodded. "I think I'll do that."

"And of course, there's always the matter of if the Dementors are rebelling against the Ministry or if someone from the Ministry itself sent them. With the great pictures I bought from Colin and Pansy, this may even make the front page!" Luna exclaimed.

"May make?" Harry asked. "What were you planning to put on the front page?"

Luna smiled happily. "It's Norbert's birthday."

--

"Don't you think you're being a little melodramatic?" Harry asked, watching Oliver Wood attempt to drown himself in the sink.

"No," Wood muttered.

"But there's not even enough water in there for you to drown in," Harry pointed out.

Wood's hand reached for the tap.

"Don't you dare," Harry swatted it away. "Do you have any idea how hard it would be to find a Keeper this late in the season? We'd probably have to end up using Ron."

"Is he any good?" Wood asked, still valiantly trying to drown.

Harry shrugged. "He has some real talent but he freezes up when other people are watching, lets them play mind games with him to

distract him from the game, and I really don't want to see what would happen if he were on the same team as the twins."

"Point," Oliver acknowledged.

"Besides, who on Earth would be captain?"

"Angelina could do it," Wood suggested.

"Look, I know I'm amazing and all but this is the first time in three years I've lost a match! We won the cup two years running!" Harry reminded him.

"But we lost this match," Oliver sighed.

"I think this falls under the category of 'act of God,'" Harry declared. "I mean, I'm good but there's really nothing I can do if Cedric happens to spot the Snitch while I'm in the middle of saving everyone from the Dementors."

Oliver didn't reply.

"Look on the bright side," Harry said cheerfully. "At least we were playing Hufflepuff. If it were Slytherin then I would never hear the end of it from Draco."

- -

At the next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, Harry peered very carefully into the room before entering it. Yeah, it LOOKED like the teacher standing in the front of the room was Remus, but it had last time, too. The full moon was over with, but Remus would still be out of sorts.

Harry decided to test it out. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"I am, thank you Harry," Remus said.

"I can't believe you left Snape in charge..." Harry said, shaking his head.

"It was either that or Sirius," Remus explained.

"I guess I see your point," Harry admitted. "But still!"

"What happened?" Remus asked, looking concerned.

"You'll see," was all Harry would say.

"Professor Lupin?" Ron asked.

"Yes?" Remus smiled at him.

"Do you still want those werewolf essays?" Ron asked.

Remus frowned slightly. "You were supposed to write an essay about werewolves? Did you tell Professor Snape we hadn't covered them yet?"

"I tried to," Hermione huffed. "But he said that if you wanted us to cover Hinkypunks you should have left a lesson plan and Harry suggested studying werewolves."

Harry met Remus's questioning stare and shrugged. "The rampant misconceptions were annoying me. Apparently they annoyed Professor Snape, too, as I heard he made every class he filled in for do an essay."

"Don't worry," Professor Lupin said calmly. "I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"But it's due today so we already did it," Seamus pointed out.

"Oh, well since not every class had been assigned it, I can't very well make it an assignment..." Remus looked a bit uncomfortable.

"So in other words, just turn it in to Snape?" Neville asked.

"Why would we do that?" Parvati asked. "He teaches Potions."

"Yeah, but he assigned the essay and if we don't give it to him what do you think will happen to our Potions grades?" Neville asked.

"Not to mention he might appreciate a sign that we think he'd be an okay Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," Harry agreed.

"Of course we do! There don't really seem to be any qualifications for the position. Er, sorry Professor," Lavender said sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it. Now, for the lesson you should have been covering on Friday: Hinkypunks."

--

"So, Hermione, did you find out anything...interesting when you were writing that werewolf essay?" Harry asked his friend as they sat outside by the Black Lake. Or at least that was what Harry thought it was called. Who really knew? Most people referred to it simply as 'the Lake.'

"Snivelly assigned you an essay on werewolves?" Sirius, who had been on his way to Hagrid's, stopped short and stared at them. At Harry's nod, he continued. "Right. This time I think I'm actually going to kill him..."

Hermione looked alarmed by this. "B-because of the essay? Does that mean that Professor Lupin really is a werewolf?"

"She figured it out before, too," Harry mouthed when Hermione wasn't looking.

Reluctantly, Sirius calmed down a little. "Yes. When he was a small child, his father did something to piss off Fenrir Greyback. Greyback, in case you didn't know, is infamous for his savagery and his predilection for attacking children, often to get back at their parents."

"But...isn't it dangerous to have a werewolf at school?" Hermione gasped.

"He attended Hogwarts and except for one minor... incident, which was mostly my fault, there were no problems," Sirius explained.

"What happened?" Hermione asked, still looking anxious.

"Someone almost walked in on Professor Lupin when he was transformed. Had he done that, he would have either died or become a werewolf himself for sure," Sirius said, looking vaguely guilty. Probably just for Remus's sake, though, as he would never forgive himself and probably been executed if anything had happened to Snape.

"How do we know that can't happen again?" Hermione demanded.

"Since then the Wolfsbane Potion has been invented," Harry piped up. "Professor Lupin still transforms physically but he doesn't mentally and so therefore it's perfectly safe."

"I suppose if Dumbledore thinks it's okay then it must be safe," Hermione said slowly. Harry had never thought he'd be grateful for Hermione's blind faith and unwavering loyalty to Dumbledore, but... "Although if that's the case, then why would Professor Snape assign us the essay? He must've known that someone could figure it out."

"Snape never liked Professor Lupin," Sirius explained. "But he can't actually tell anyone so he's just hinting at it. It's just so immature it's unbelievable."

"Pot meet kettle," Harry muttered.

--

The only really interesting that that happened in the weeks to follow was the result of Luna and her father's 'investigation' into the circumstances behind the Dementors' appearance. Harry really shouldn't have been surprised by the result, but he was anyway.

"Congratulations, Luna," Harry said. "How in the world did you manage to track the attack back to Dolores Umbridge?"

"A reporter's got to protect her sources, Harry," Luna said solemnly. "I must say, I'm glad that we caught her, though. Endangering schoolchildren because she felt that your influence might be a threat..."

"I know," Harry agreed. "Really horrible thing to do. I wonder what her trial will be like. Fudge insists he didn't know anything about it and I'm actually inclined to believe him. He really doesn't know much of what goes on around him. How did he get to be Minister again?"

"He's easily bribable and Dumbledore didn't want the job?" Luna suggested.

"Ah, right. Still, Madam Bones would probably make a good minister..." Harry mused.

"But then who would be in charge of the Aurors?" Luna asked. "The last thing we need is an incompetent and/or corrupt Auror force."

"Maybe I can be Minister someday," Harry said. "I never really thought about it before that Boggart lesson, but it's an idea."

"I never liked Mondays anyway," Luna said loyally.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Three

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: I know that J.K. Rowling said that Flint failed his final year but...seriously? NO ONE fails their final year. If he was really that stupid there is no way he'd be Quidditch Captain. Besides, she only said that after someone noticed that he should have been graduated after book three was published. Therefore, I'm choosing to ignore it.

Harry was not in a very good mood heading to Divination and it was all his so-called friends' fault. They were in a great mood, of course, seeing as how they had just come from Charms where they had learned to cast the Cheering Charm (even Hermione had remembered to go seeing as how Harry as a concerned friend and Percy as a concerned Head Boy had been making her get some sleep all year and so she wasn't as frazzled).

Harry, sadly, was not under the influence of the Cheering Charm. He had partnered with Hermione while Ron and Neville teamed up and Hermione had somehow gotten it into her head that the thought of an extraordinarily cheerful and hyperactive Harry was a bad thing or something and refused to cast it on him. When she explained the situation, Ron and Neville immediately agreed to let her practice the Charm on the pair of them and as a result both boys were practically glowing with happiness. SO not fair.

"We're starting crystal balls early!" Ron exclaimed. "Yes! No more palm reading!"

"And because we don't have to deal with all the different lines on the hand and just talk about what we 'see', it will be so much easier to make up," Neville added, pleased.

Hermione, even cheerful, was hard-pressed to say something positive about their Divination class. "I...at least we're learning something new," she finally said, lamely.

"How long do those stupid charms last?" Harry muttered, annoyed. His classmates, of course, didn't answer as they were all too busy being high on life. And magic.

"Good day to you!" Professor Trelawney greeted them, perking up at their obvious enthusiasm. "I'm pleased to see you all so excited to start our study of the crystal ball. It's a little earlier than I had planned, but the Fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

"Well, honestly... 'the Fates have informed her'...who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction," Hermione scoffed. Her resiliency to the effects of the Cheering Charm (and Harry knew it wasn't because of his spell-casting as he'd long since mastered that particular charm) was quite admirable.

"I don't know, Hermione," Harry disagreed, just to be annoying. "Self-fulfilling prophecies are the most dangerous kind and we don't know that the Orb would be on our exam if Professor Trelawney hadn't been notified."

"A self-fulfilling prophecy sounds really, really lame," Hermione replied.

"I'm with you," Harry said easily. "But that doesn't mean that it's not true."

"Well said, Harry," Trelawney smiled over at him. "I am often both fascinated and frustrated by the self-fulfilling natures of many prophecies. For instance, would they have come to pass had the prophecy not been made? And if the prophecy will be fulfilled regardless of the attempts of we mere mortals, then what purpose does receiving prophecies in the first place serve? But alas, that is a subject for another time."

Hermione, who had actually looked mildly intrigued by that line of questioning, looked rather put out.

"So what do you see?" Neville asked when their teacher had finally deemed them 'ready' to begin.

"I see..." Harry trailed off, gazing into the crystal bog. 'Fog', his mind supplied. "My godfather turning Snape into at least four different people by the end of the year," he said instead.

Neville snorted. "Only four?"

Harry shrugged. "I said 'at least', didn't I? Anyway, what do you see?"

Neville glanced idly into the crystal ball then smirked. "I see Gryffindor winning the House Cup for the third year in a row."

"I hate you," Harry deadpanned. "You know that, right?"

Neville shrugged. "I can live with it."

"You two are just making things up again, aren't you?" Hermione accused. "Ron and I can't see anything."

"Prove it," Neville said.

"I told you, Hermione, I saw-" Ron began by Hermione interrupted him.

"I highly doubt Harry and one of the twins are going to enter themselves into some sort of international competition at Hogwarts."

Harry started coughing. Ron was alluding to the Triwizard Tournament? How in the-? And why would Fred or George-? Maybe these things weren't so ridiculous after all...no, on second thought they were just that stupid.

"Just because you can't see anything is no reason to shun the true believers, Hermione," Harry said seriously.

"Yeah, you can't be good at everything," Ron added.

"I don't want to be good at every-" Hermione began, red-faced.

"Yes you do," Harry and Neville chorused.

"They have a point, my dear," Trelawney said gently, coming up from behind her. "And as it stands, you are far too devoted to the world of logic and facts to ever really succeed in such a delicate art form as this."

"You know what?" Hermione said angrily, shoving her book back into her bag. "I don't even care anymore. This class is a waste of my time and I can't believe it took me seven months to realize this. I'm leaving." She then stormed out rather dramatically (but still slightly bouncy from the residual effects of the charm).

"Ooooo!" Lavender squealed the moment she was gone. "This is so cool! You told us that 'Around Easter, one of our numbers will leave us forever!' And she totally did!"

"Isn't that a little hasty?" Seamus asked. Seeing Parvati and Lavender's sudden glares, he quickly backtracked. "I mean, not that I don't have absolute faith in divination and everything, but she just stormed out of one class. I can't really imagine that Hermione Granger, of all people would willingly drop a class. Especially before exams. And especially considering the fact that she's using a Time Turner to get to all of her classes on time in the first place."

"I suppose you have a point," Parvati said grudgingly. "But on the other hand, the prediction is right so far. What are the odds that it's just a coincidence?"

"Besides," Dean added. "Hermione basically told us all that she's not coming back. If she does end up returning, it would be really embarrassing for her and considering that she never liked this class anyway and spends a lot of time with Harry – who we all know would never let her live it down – I think it's safe to say that she won't be coming back anytime soon."

"You're amazing, Professor," Lavender said, her voice full of awe.

"I'm impressed, too," Harry admitted. "I mean, it figures that if someone would drop the class, it would be her, but how did you know she'd be able to make it seven months? You'd think if she managed

to last this long she could last another month and a half until exams and then not sign up for it next year."

"When you have had as many years of experience with the Inner Eye as I have, you too will be able remove logic from your interpretations of future events," Trelawney said dreamily.

Harry grinned. "Can't wait."

Ron paled and started shaking.

"Can I drop the class, too?" Neville asked, sounding slightly desperate.

"No," Trelawney said without looking at him.

--

"That was quite a show," Harry said as he slid into his seat in Muggle Studies.

"I don't want to talk about it," Hermione said shortly.

Harry smiled apologetically. "I figured that. Still, dropping a class right before the exams? Are you sure that's the best decision? It will have made all the work you've already put into it completely pointless."

"The fact that I apparently don't have the 'Inner Eye' or your skills at lying your ass off makes all the effort I've put into it all year completely pointless," Hermione countered. "Besides, even with using the Time Turner to take breaks and get some rest, I'm still really stressing out and having to spend hours brushing up on something that really has no practical purpose and that I'm not convinced is genuine in the first place just seems rather...a bit too much, really."

"You do realize that now half the class is convinced that Trelawney made a prediction, right?" Harry said, grinning a bit.

Hermione cocked her head, confused. "No, why?"

"Apparently our first class, she told us that 'one of our number' would be leaving forever or something like that. I think she was talking about dying as I'm fairly certain that was before she decided I wasn't doomed after all, but it was vague enough it could easily apply to that. Although how Lavender managed to remember that all these months..." Harry shook his head, impressed.

"Maybe she wrote it down," Hermione suggested.

"Maybe," Harry conceded. "Hi, Theodore!"

"Why are you talking to me?" Theodore Nott asked, sounding bored.
"Again?"

"Because you're the one person I've found aside from Professor Snape who doesn't like me," Harry explained.

Theodore snorted. "That's what you think."

"Well, that's this obvious about it," Harry corrected. "And as for the people I don't know...well, I don't really care what they think as long as enough of them like me well enough to do whatever I tell them to do."

"You realize you sound like some sort of cult leader, right?" Theodore asked. "I think you picked the wrong house if you were thinking of being a Dark Lord."

"Oh, no, I've currently got my heart set on Minister of Magic," Harry assured him.

"Now that is a scary thought. I'll definitely make a note to go abroad in the event that ever happens," Theodore said, actually shuddering a bit. "Besides, I am not 'obvious' about disliking you; you didn't even notice until we had this class together."

Harry considered this. "True...but now that I do know I can't stop thinking about it! It's driving me crazy."

At this Theodore actually looked a little offended. "You cannot possibly blame your vast array of mental problems on me."

"Well, you've certainly exacerbated them," Harry muttered.

Theodore rolled his eyes. "That I can live with. Do you often obsess over Slytherin boys?"

"No..." Harry lied, remembering those few months in second year and all of sixth year with Draco back when he was Malfoy and Snape...well, whenever anything went wrong, really.

"Hello class," Professor Burbage said, entering the room. "Today I thought we'd take a break from our normal topics and instead examine how Muggles view magic. Let's start with Divination..."

Hermione groaned loudly.

--

"Don't worry, Harry, you'll be fine," Hermione said, her terrified look belying her confident words.

"I know I will," Harry said, spreading some margarine on his toast.

"You've got a Firebolt!" Ron added, trying his hardest to support his supposedly anxious friend.

"I've had a Firebolt for the other two matches as well," Harry pointed out.

"If you lose, you know Draco will never, ever let this go, right? As in ever," Neville reminded him gravely.

"I know, but the fact of the matter is that I've got a better broom and, what's more, I'm simply better at this than he is. The only time I've ever lost is due to circumstances beyond my control and if, for some ungodly reason, Dementors invade again, I'm catching the Snitch THEN saving everyone's souls," Harry vowed.

"Good to see you have your priorities in order," Ginny said sarcastically. "And speaking of, if you die, can I have your broom?"

"Are you guys even listening?" Harry demanded.

"I doubt it," Percy replied from a few seats over. "But then, today's the day of the big match and everyone seems to have caught Quidditch fever."

"You don't," Harry pointed out, ignoring his spazzing friends in favor of someone that could usually be counted on to be sane. Well, unless his career was involved, but Percy hadn't even graduated yet.

"Oh trust me, compared to first year I have a great deal of enthusiasm for Quidditch," Percy countered.

"But...you barely support the team," Harry said, confused.

"Bill and Charlie used to play it all the time using my toys as Quaffles," Percy explained. "So did the twins, come to think of it. Naturally, I was quite anti-Quidditch when I started Hogwarts."

"So what happened?" Harry wanted to know. You'd think that having siblings on the Quidditch team wouldn't help with that."

"Indeed it didn't," Percy agreed. "Seeing as how first Charlie and then Fred and George felt the need to steal my books anytime they wanted to play a pick-up game. Still, one does not surviving rooming with Oliver Wood for seven years without picking up a basic appreciation of the game."

"So it was self-preservation, then?" Harry grinned.

"Like you wouldn't believe."

--

"Hey, Flint," Harry called out.

“What, Potter?” Flint snapped back. They were in the middle of the game, after all, and even if Harry – as Seeker – could dally around all he wanted to as long as Draco didn’t spot the Snitch either, that didn’t mean that a Chaser like him could.

“I didn’t go to the other Slytherin matches so I wouldn’t know if you were there or not, but why are you here?” Harry inquired. “I KNOW you graduated.”

Despite his annoyance, Flint actually smirked. “True, but Dumbledore never comes to the matches and the other teachers all just assume I’m repeating someone else’s class. I’m actually not sure if I should be insulted or relieved it’s that easy to convince everyone that I somehow managed to fail.”

“What about the other Slytherins?” Harry wanted to know.

“What about them?” asked Flint.

“Wouldn’t they realize that you’re only ever seen at matches and possibly practices?” Harry said reasonably.

Flint snorted. “Of course they do, but they have a lot of House Pride and not much respect for school rules. Besides, there weren’t any other prospects for captain.”

“I see,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Great, now bugger off,” Flint ordered as he zoomed after Katie Bell.

“Fine, be that way...now let’s see...hey, is that the Snitch?” Harry wondered aloud as he hurtled towards it. Fifteen feet away from it, his broom lurched. Surprised, Harry turned around to see Draco grabbing onto his Firebolt and pulling it back. “What the Hell?”

Draco looked positively gleeful. “All’s fair in love and-Ow!” One of his hands released the broom.

Harry nodded and cast another stinging hex at the other boy to make him let go. "Indeed." With that, he hurtled after the Snitch again. "Yes! Three for three! I've still got it!"

Note: I'd like to clear up this issue before I get twenty reviews about it: No, the fact that Ron 'saw' something that could be interpreted as the Triwizard Tournament does not mean he has any future knowledge nor has he also come back. The only people who have are Harry and Sirius.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Four

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: By ‘no one fails their final year’, I mean ‘no one at Hogwarts fails their final year.’ Apparently it’s so easy to pass that you don’t even need to TAKE the Exams in order to move up to the next grade, although those that do poorly on their OWLS/NEWTS might have some career difficulties starting out. And even in the real world, people usually don’t fail for being stupid, they fail for lack of attendance and/or doing the work. Stupidity...not so much. I’ve seen some pretty stupid people graduate.

Other note: Finally! Third Year’s done! And I finished it before my class! It was kind of short, but I didn’t want to just completely skip over it and since nothing was actually going on, it couldn’t drag on too long. Next year will be interesting, though.

Exams were never fun. Even if you were twelve years older than everyone else taking the exams and had, in fact, literally done some of the spells in your sleep. And the complaining from everyone else about how ‘difficult’ it was to turn a teapot into a tortoise. Although that wasn’t nearly as bad as Hermione moaning about how her tortoise looked more like a turtle.

“Hermione,” Harry said patiently. “We’ve been over this. You did the spell for changing a teacup into a tortoise, not the spell for changing a teacup into a turtle. And don’t think Professor McGonagall won’t get a letter from the new Magical Chapter of PETA for this. Seriously, what is with everyone and their constant abuse of animals?”

“Harry, look at how everyone treats people who don’t happen to have magical powers and ask me that again,” Hermione told him. “Anyway, getting back to the fact that I’m going to fail-”

“Oh, please, Hermione,” Ron scoffed. “NO ONE fails. Ever.”

“Marcus Flint did,” Hermione reminded them.

Harry snorted.

"What?" she demanded.

"Nothing, just that he didn't fail; he just showed up to play Quidditch," Harry explained.

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. "Right. Like anyone would come all the way back to Hogwarts and convince everyone that they had to repeat a year just to play a couple of Quidditch games."

There was silence for a moment as the three boys exchanged pitying glances.

"I totally would," Ron said.

"Me too," Neville agreed.

"They would have to pay me," decided Harry.

"Right, because that's not pathetic at ALL," Hermione rolled her eyes.

"It's not pathetic," Ron corrected her. "It's Quidditch."

"And even if it were possible for anyone to fail at Hogwarts," Neville quickly changed the subject as Hermione looked to be bracing herself on a rant about Quidditch fanatics. "Having the end result look like a practically identical species isn't exactly the worst thing that could happen. I mean, look at Ron's tortoise: it still peed tea."

"Hey, at least I didn't lose my head and accidentally turn my teacup into a flock of flamingos," Ron shot back.

"Oh, right, Hannah Abbot," Harry smiled fondly. "One of these days that girl is going to learn to keep her head in an exam..."

"Mine still wasn't as good as Harry's, though," Hermione pouted. "Professor McGonagall said she'd never seen a more perfect tortoise in all her years at Hogwarts! I just can't compete with that."

"Don't feel bad, Hermione," Harry reassured her. "McGonagall just thinks I'm a Transfiguration prodigy like my dad apparently was."

"But all the other teacher's say the same thing!" Hermione pointed out. "Well...except for Snape." Snape had, as a matter of fact, docked Harry's potion five points because he had ended up using a modified recipe for the Confusing Concoction that Luna always swore by – apparently her mum had made the changes.

"Don't you mean 'Slughorn'?" Harry grinned. Right before their Potion's Exam, Sirius had apparently decided that since Snape's hovering tendencies were such a distraction, replacing Snape's unpleasant countenance with Slughorn's physically-incapable-of-being-imposing one would make them all feel better. Of course, half the class didn't even know who Slughorn was, but it was the thought that counted. Besides, Harry knew full well and was amused as hell.

And it was a good thing that he WAS so amused, because otherwise he'd be annoyed that Hermione had, once again, refused to use the Cheering Charm on him for the exam. And to make matter worse, Professor Flitwick seemed to agree with her and let her do the Charm on somebody else.

Hagrid's exam was a great deal more interesting than 'don't kill the Flobberworms', which Harry vaguely remembered it to be last time. This time, they all had to take a ride on a Hippogriff. Needless to say, this was Harry's easiest exam to date. The rest of the class vehemently disagreed with that, but the fact that no one else knew what to do was their own damn fault for making him deal with Buckbeak alone during their first class.

Their Astronomy Exam went okay, or so Harry was told. He kind of fell asleep ten minutes into it but his friends assured him that when Professor Sinistra came by to give him his oral exam, he had sleep-answered all of her questions correctly. So maybe that was the easiest exam ever.

In Herbology, Harry took great delight in making fun of his classmates for not knowing any charms to cast to keep from getting sunburned as they all turned bright red as the hours wore on. The Exam itself

was pretty boring, but then, that was Herbology. Even if it was dealing with magical and potentially lethal plants, the fact remained that it was a class on plants. He just couldn't find it within himself to really care one way or another.

Muggle Studies was his first new Exam of the timeline and it was actually rather enjoyable. They basically just took a Portkey to London, were handed a few pounds, and told to try and act inconspicuous. Granted, they had to do a paper on the experience once it was over, but still, he and Hermione had had fun pretending to be tourists.

Divination was also easy, since it just took Harry making something up, which he had been doing on a regular basis ever since he came back to the past. Harry told Trelawney that he saw a group of people trying to bring Voldemort back to life and getting arrested. She jumped a little at the name, but Harry ignored it. He didn't know that was going to happen, per se, but so help him it had better. And if nothing else, Harry's vehemence seemed to impress the professor.

Their History of Magic Exam was probably the biggest deviation from what had happened during the previous timeline's Exams. Instead of a written test about medieval witch hunts that nobody cared about and only ever ended up killing Muggles anyway, Sirius announced that everyone was going to have to write an essay about something they'd learned in his class that year ranging from 200 words to 1600 words, depending on how well they did in his oral quiz. Basically, he called on them at random and asked them a question about what they'd covered that year. The first one to miss a question was out and had to write the 1600 word essay, the second one to miss a question had to write the 1400 word essay, and so on. Harry was kind of miffed because he'd lost to Hermione at the last second with 'What is the name of the orphanage Tom Riddle grew up in?' Like he CARED. Still, a 400 word essay was a piece of cake. He was tempted to go over to annoy his classmates who had to write more, but had forgone that for turning it in within ten minutes and playing Hangman with Sirius while everyone else wrote and Hermione revised. Needless to say, when her 200-word essay turned out to be a little over 3000, no one was exactly surprised. Annoyed, granted, but not surprised. And as the students were used to having their essays be a certain number

of inches or – recently – pages, Sirius cast a spell on all of their paper to automatically list how many words they had so far.

Harry's favorite Exam, of course, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. The obstacle course was great fun and reminded him a little bit of Auror training – on that first day where they were weeding out those who couldn't hack it at the real training. Harry, of course, finished first with full marks. This annoyed Hermione to no end considering he'd done it backwards, with his eyes closed, and without his wand. But that was just what she got for beating him in Sirius's class. There was no way his godfather would let him live down being outsmarted by a fourteen-year-old, even if it was Hermione.

"I can't believe you took directions from our exam," Harry laughed at Ron, who had encountered problems upon reaching the Hinkypunk when he had – for some reason – followed its advice and ended up sinking waist-high into the quagmire.

"What would you know? You had your eyes closed the entire time! It's not like you could have stopped it and asked for directions," Ron replied.

"I get that you're sore that I beat you so blatantly in this Exam," Harry told his agitated friend. "But you have to remember: this is my subject."

"You had the fastest time yet!" Ron pointed out, still irritated.

"My subject," Harry reiterated.

"Your modesty is really your best quality, Harry," Hermione said dryly as she came up behind them.

"Hey," Harry greeted her. "How was sonnet-spewing McGonagall?"

"She wasn't," Hermione answered. Upon seeing the twin looks of confusion on Harry and Ron's face's, she elaborated, "This time she rapping an opera about my failings."

Harry laughed. "Now that I have to see. I wonder if I can-"

"No," Ron interrupted. "I can see what you're going to ask and I'm telling you right now: she'll never do it, mate."

"Spoilsport," Harry pouted. "Hey, what's taking Neville? He's been in there with the Boggart for over twenty minutes now."

Hermione and Ron exchanged meaningful glances.

"Well," Hermione began, trying to be tactful. "His Boggart is rather intimidating..."

"It is NOT-" Harry started to say when he was interrupted by Neville bursting out of the trunk with the Boggart, screaming.

"Oh shut up," Harry said annoyed as Ron started giggling.

"What happened?" Ron asked between his laughter.

Neville looked tentatively at Harry. "You wouldn't...REALLY...convert your old house into a haunted house would you? Or allow people to keep their name off of the list of registered animagus' by paying extra? Or give the House Elves a union? Or allow Goblin's to use wands on Mondays since they don't exist? Or make everyone wear pink on Thursdays? Or make 'Do the Hippogriff' by the Weird Sisters Magical Britain's national anthem? Or regularly import llamas and releasing them in random places? Or-"

"Dear God, how many of those do you have?" Hermione asked, horrorstruck.

Neville shrugged. "Remember, I was in there for awhile."

Harry sighed. "To answer your question, Neville: No, no I would not. But I do plan on becoming Minister one day, thanks for the idea."

With that, Neville promptly fainted.

Harry rolled his eyes. "He is SO faking." He nudged the boy with his foot. "Probably."

--

This year, Harry didn't even bother sitting down at the Gryffindor table during the end-of-the-year feast. He knew he'd have to bail very shortly anyway when Dumbledore started reading off point totals, so he just made his way to the Slytherin's at the beginning of the meal.

"Why are you here?" a black boy Harry thought might be in a few of his classes asked.

"I can't possibly be with the Gryffindors when we win the House Cup," Harry explained. "And I've sat with the Ravenclaw's a few times already recently."

"Why can't you sit with the Hufflepuffs?" the boy asked, eyeing him warily.

"Blaise, don't!" Theodore warned, sitting down next to the boy in question – Blaise Zabini apparently.

"Don't what?" Blaise asked, confused. "I just asked him a question."

"Talking encourages him," Theodore explained.

"I don't NEED to be encouraged," Harry claimed. "I'm a Gryffindor."

"We noticed," Draco said, sliding into the seat beside Harry.

"And as for why I'm not at the Hufflepuff table...well, the first time Draco and I met we were talking about the House's. We decided that if we ended up in Hufflepuff, he'd leave and I'd defect. Since I'd have to come over here anyway if I went over to the Hufflepuff table, I decided to just spare myself a trip and come here instead," Harry explained.

"How can you defect from something if you haven't actually been a part of it in the first place?" Blaise couldn't help asking.

"Blaise!" Theodore cried.

"Sorry," he apologized. "But Draco's encouraging him, too. Why aren't you yelling at him?"

Theodore rolled his eyes. "Draco, God help him, likes Potter."

"Not to mention my teenage rebellion," Draco added.

"That reminds me, are your parents still pissed?" Harry asked.

Draco snorted, but didn't say anything. Harry took that as a 'yes.'

Dumbledore stood up then. "This year has been an exceptionally high-scoring year as far as House points go – the highest I've ever seen. In fourth place is Hufflepuff with 9307 points. In third place we have Ravenclaw with 9526 points. In second place we have Slytherin with 10094 points. And in first place, with the single greatest number of points accumulated during the course of one year we have Gryffindor with 13877 points!"

"What's with these freakishly high point tallies?" Draco asked.

"Sirius gives out points like candy," Harry explained. "Not to mention his 'Fifty Points to anyone who hear say 'Voldemort' thing."

"For once, I do not actually have any last-minute points to give out—" Dumbledore paused as Sirius leaned over and said something. "Correction, I award Harry Potter fifty points for finally saying 'Voldemort', bringing Gryffindor's total up to 13927."

Harry banged his head on the table. "Damn him."

"Dumbledore?" Draco asked.

"No, Sirius. I was so careful not to say that in front of him this year, but now...And damn Neville, too, for predicting that we'd win again."

"EVERYONE knew you were going to win," Theodore pointed out.

"Not helping," Harry said.

"Not trying to," Theodore replied.

"Seriously, does EVERYONE get to talk to Potter but me?" Blaise complained.

--

"So how did you beat the curse?" Harry asked Remus curiously.

"Curse?" Remus repeated absently as he packed.

"You know, the one Voldemort put on the Defense Against the Dark Arts position so Dumbledore would have to get a new one every year? Seriously immature of him, by the way," Harry reflected.

"Oh, I didn't. My contract was only for a year," Remus told him.

"Oh." Harry paused. "What are you going to do now, then? I mean, didn't you say your lycanthropy made it kind of hard to find work?"

Remus smiled at that. "Normally, yes, but Sirius-"

"Totally hired him to be Lord Black," Sirius interrupted, barging into Remus' office.

"He hired you to be Lord Black?" Harry looked to Remus for confirmation.

Remus nodded. "He likes the title but he doesn't want to deal with all the responsibilities and I needed a job."

"Besides," Sirius added. "Moony's, like, the most responsible person I know. He knows all the laws, he's a half-blood so it ought to annoy anyone I'm related to who isn't Remus's future girlfriend or her mother and-"

"For the last time, Sirius," Remus cut in. "Nymphadora is NOT my girlfriend."

"She let's you call her Nymphadora," Harry pointed out.

"Yeah, not even I get to do that," Sirius agreed.

"She let's Cedric Diggory and Charlie Weasley call her that, too," Remus said defensively.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but those two are because she lost a bet. And she doesn't bet first-name privileges anymore. I should know: I've tried."

"Nymphadora is a bit young for me," Remus insisted. "Seeing as how she just graduated two years ago."

"I absolutely agree," Sirius said heartily, patting Remus on the back.

Remus looked up, surprised. "You...do?"

"Definitely," Sirius confirmed. "For another two or three years. But then I expect you and her to start going out. I'm sure you'll be very happy together. But Harry and I expect joint godfather-status."

"Aren't...you going to warn me about breaking her heart?" Remus asked, a bit dazed. "And what's this about children-?"

"Why, are you planning on breaking her heart?" Sirius challenged, pointedly ignoring the second question.

"Well, no, but-" Remus began.

"Then she can handle herself. She is well on her way to becoming an Auror, after all," Sirius said proudly. "And I'm sure she could castrate you far better than I ever could."

Remus gulped.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Five

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Last chapter, Snape was, in fact, proctoring the Potions exam. Sirius decided that since Snape was always so overbearing and as such people were liable to mess up, he'd make him look like someone less threatening, thus ruining the effect.

After another epic but nondescript summer, Harry and Sirius decided to end things by dragging Remus and Tonks along to the Quidditch World Cup. Remus because he was Sirius' best friend and Tonks because she was Sirius' sole cool relative. And also because they wanted Remus and Tonks nice and acquainted for when Tonks was actually old enough for Remus to date. The first people they met, naturally, were Cedric Diggory and his father – whose name Harry never could remember – who only seemed to want to talk about that one time Cedric beat Harry. It was kind of creepy, really.

"Ced told us all about you, of course," Mr. Diggory was saying. "Said you're mad as a hatter but practically a demon on a broom. I said to him – Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren, that will...you beat Harry Potter!"

"How does it feel to have your father deciding that winning an amateur Quidditch Match is going to be your greatest achievement in life?" Harry asked curiously.

Cedric made a face. "Fantastic. I'd imagine it's almost as nice as having everyone decide that you're greatest achievement will be making it to your second birthday, something everyone else has managed just fine without getting famous."

Harry laughed. "Touché."

"And it's not like it was even a fair match, anyway, since the Dementors' came out of nowhere and attacked," Cedric continued.

Harry, much as his pride was begging him not to (which was ironic to be sure), disagreed. "You caught the Snitch before you even realized

the Dementors were there. While that might be slightly oblivious of you, it still meant that you had the Snitch in your sights and I was nowhere near you. Even if the Dementors hadn't shown up, you still would have caught it."

Cedric smirked. "Does that mean you're admitting I'm better than you?"

"Like hell," Harry scoffed. "I've beaten you two games to one."

"But I am the only one who's ever beaten you at Quidditch," Cedric pointed out.

"Which I'm sure you're grandchildren will just love hearing about," Harry countered.

"If you're popularity doesn't die down, they probably will..." Cedric said, shaking his head.

"Besides, I've only ever played against you, Draco, and Cho. Saying I'm a better Seeker than three other people isn't really saying much," Harry told the older boy. "Hey, that reminds me. Did you make Head Boy?"

Cedric gave him a strange look. "Harry...I'm a sixth year."

Harry blinked, surprised. "You are? Crap, that makes it even worse."

"That makes what even worse?" Cedric asked confused.

"Word of advice, if you ever find yourself suddenly and mysteriously portkeyed to a graveyard, don't ask questions, don't look around, just grab the Portkey again and get out of there," Harry said firmly.

"...Alright," Cedric agreed finally. "That sounds oddly specific, do you..."

"What can I say?" Harry interrupted. "I'm a Divination prodigy."

"I don't believe in Divination," Cedric replied immediately.

"I don't really care," Harry confessed. "But you did agree to do that, so my work here is done." With that, Harry turned his attention back to the 'adults.'

"That's fascinating, Amos," Remus was saying. Oh, right, AMOS was his name. Ah well, Harry would probably end up forgetting it again as soon as he left, anyway. "We have to keep moving, though. We're looking for the Weasley's. They promised to save us a spot for our tent..."

"I quite understand," Amos said heartily. "Don't let us keep you. I need to discuss that bill on werewolf rights you're working on with you when we get back to the Ministry, though. I've got a few ideas on the subject myself."

"I'll stop by and see you first thing Monday," Remus promised.

"So you're working on a bill about werewolf rights?" Harry asked as they set off again. "Won't that cause problems because people will assume you're just doing it because you're a werewolf?"

"Well...I am mostly doing it because I'm a werewolf," Remus admitted. "If I weren't, I wouldn't be as aware of the blatant discrimination and appalling treatment we receive."

"Not to mention the fact that most people don't know about his, what did you call it Sirius? His 'furry little problem,'" Tonks added.

"Oh, that was code for 'Remus is a werewolf?'" Harry deadpanned. "I thought it meant that he had a badly behaved rabbit."

"How did you corrupt him so quickly?" Remus demanded, turning to Sirius. "You've only known him for about a year."

"It's not me," Sirius insisted, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. "It's the genes. And partly me, I guess, but mostly just James."

Remus just rolled his eyes.

All in all, they were very grateful to finally reach the Weasleys. When they were walking through a rather Pro-Irish section, Seamus had ambushed them and dragged them off to meet his mother and Tonks almost started a riot by confessing that she didn't actually know who was playing besides 'whatever team that Krum guy's on.' Harry and Sirius, both avid Quidditch fans themselves, were currently refusing to speak to her.

"Hey, what took you so long?" Ron asked.

"Tonks almost started a riot," Remus explained when Sirius and Harry pointedly didn't say anything. Realizing that the Weasley's were also somewhat of a family of Quidditch fanatics, he continued, "Don't ask."

"Did that take all day or something?" Ginny asked. "We've been here for four hours."

Harry's eyes widened in horror at the thought of waking up that early during the summer. "Why?"

"Because we're not old enough to Apparate like Bill, Charlie, and Percy," Ginny explained sourly. "Does that mean that you haven't been here that long?"

"God no," Harry shook his head vehemently. "Remus and Tonks Apparated while I did side-along Apparition with Sirius."

"Dad! Why couldn't we do Side-Along Apparition and get here at a normal time?" Ginny demanded.

"Because we had four people who could Apparated and six who couldn't, including Hermione and Neville," Arthur explained. "I didn't want to make two trips."

Grumbling under her breath, Ginny let it go.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry greeted his Quidditch-enthusiasm-challenged friend. "Do YOU know who's playing?"

"Of course," she replied, looking bemused. "Ireland and Bulgaria. How could I not know that?"

"No idea," Harry said honestly. "Either way, this is Sirius's cool relative, Tonks. I think you two would get along."

"Even I know that Ireland and Bulgaria are playing each other," Percy said. "Are you saying that someone here didn't? Possibly Tonks?"

Harry nodded sadly. "I just don't get it...I mean, I know since Hermione just said who was playing I have no proof you knew before then, but I'm willing to give Oliver the benefit of the doubt on that one..."

"Don't you mean give ME the benefit of the doubt?" Percy asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm pretty sure I meant Oliver, seeing as how it's all thanks to him that you have even a basic appreciation of the sport."

"And it's all thanks to my brothers that I needed Oliver's intervention," Percy continued. "Speaking of, did the twins just bet their entire saving that Ireland will win the match but Krum will get the Snitch?"

Harry looked over at the twins, who were handing a sizeable bag of money over to Ludo Bagman. "Oh no..." he breathed, remembering Bagman's chronic gambling and goblin problems that had lead to him practically stalking Harry during the Tournament.

"You sound pretty confident," Harry noted, making his way over to his future business partners. "You know what, I'll bet you fifty galleons that Ireland gets the Snitch."

The twins exchanged glances.

"We don't actually have-" Fred began.

"Fifty galleons-" George continued.

"So we can't-

"In good conscience-"

"Take that bet," Fred finished.

"You won't need fifty galleons if you win," Harry pointed out. "And if not, it's not like I don't see you everyday anyway. So again: how sure are you?"

The twins had a silent conversation with their eyes.

"We'll take it," George said finally.

"Here you go," Harry pulled out a large pouch of money, counted out fifty galleons, and put it in a smaller bag before handing it to the twins.
"Take good care of my money."

There, that should take care of most of the twins' problems when Bagman proved not to be good for it.

Of course, that wasn't likely to stop them from hounding Bagman anyone but...at least this way it might stop Molly from murdering her troublemaking sons and the father who let it happen.

"Betting with schoolchildren, Ludo?" Barty Crouch asked disdainfully as he entered the clearing.

"I-er..." Bagman really didn't have an response for that, seeing as how it was true.

"Never mind," Crouch said impatiently. "I've been looking for you everywhere. The Bulgarians are insisting that we add another twelve seats to the Top Box."

"Oh, is that what they're after?" Bagman asked. "I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong accent."

"Next time you cannot understand an accent, kindly find someone to interpret for you," Crouch said sternly.

"Mr. Crouch!" Percy greeted a little breathlessly, bowing slightly.
"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No thank you, Weasley," Crouch shook his head. "I brought my own drink." With that, he took a sip of his flask.

Harry started. Did Crouch just get Percy's name right? Although, come to think of it, it was a little strange how he kept getting it wrong before, since he clearly knew who Arthur was and you couldn't really miss that the two were related.

"Why, Barty," Bagman said with a grin. "Is that whiskey you've got in there?"

"Certainly not," Crouch looked highly affronted. "I would never stoop so low as to drink on the job or at such an important international event like this! I'm just very particular about my tea, so I brought my own so as not to make a fuss."

"If you say so..." Bagman sing-songed.

"Any news on Bertha Jorkins, yet?" Arthur asked the other two Department Heads.

"Not a dicky bird," said Bagman comfortably. "But she'll turn up. Poor old Bertha...memory like a leaky cauldron and no sense of direction. Lost, you take my word for it. She'll wander back into the office sometime in October, thinking it's still July."

"You don't think it might be time to send someone to look for her?" Arthur suggested tentatively.

"The problem is, Arthur, that she went missing in Albania," Crouch explained. "We have asked the authorities to be on the lookout for her, but that's about all we can do as it's out of our jurisdiction. Besides, no one really remembers seeing her so there aren't even any solid leads. We're hoping of course, but you know how these things are. She was probably attacked by a local dark wizard or some sort of dark creature."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. He remembered Bertha. She had come out of Voldemort's wand right before his parents. He didn't remember too much about her disappearance except that Voldemort had killed her after Pettigrew had brought her to him and that's how he knew of the Tournament. But if Pettigrew were in Azkaban than what happened to Bertha? Was it just a coincidence?

Harry hated coincidences.

--

"Where are you sitting?" Arthur asked Sirius as everyone made their way into the giant stadium.

"Top box," Sirius said proudly. "It was part of my reparation. Of course, the rest of it went to buying Harry a Firebolt but..."

"You don't mind because I'm your godson and you love me?" Harry suggested.

"...Let's go with that, sure," Sirius replied.

"That's where we're sitting, too," Arthur enthused. "Bagman owed me a favor."

"The Ministry is bending over backwards so I don't write that tell-all exposé about life as an innocent man in Azkaban," Sirius countered.

"Ah, Harry!" Fudge said warmly, standing up to greet him. "So nice to see you again! And under better circumstances that last time, I'd like to think. Allow me to introduce you to the Bulgarian Minister of Magic. He doesn't speak a word of English, but—"

"Really?" Sirius perked up. "I speak Bulgarian."

Tonks looked at him in surprise. "You do?"

"Of course," Sirius nodded. "So does your mother, come to think of it. After Dumbledore got appointed Headmaster, our parents were debating whether to send us to Durmstrang. Of course, Durmstrang

isn't actually IN Bulgaria, but it has plenty of Bulgarian students and they made us learn all the languages they thought we might encounter."

"Really?" Tonks was fascinated. "What changed their minds?"

"They decided the uniforms were tacky," Narcissa Malfoy replied, entering the box, followed by her husband and son. "Hello, Sirius."

"Narcissa," Sirius nodded his head. "Draco." He paused. "I don't actually remember what your husband's name is..."

"Lucius," Narcissa replied. "I heard you gave away your title?"

"I'm actually more of a regent than anything else..." Remus clarified.

"I'm too busy to be bothered," Sirius added. "Teaching at Hogwarts, having a life...Very few people manage both, you know."

"So, um, do you think you could help translate?" Fudge piped up.

Sirius looked startled, like he'd completely forgotten about Fudge and his foreign language woes. "Oh, certainly, yes." He moved over closer to the foreign minister and began conversing with him in his native tongue.

"Hi, Draco," Harry greeted.

Narcissa shot him an icy look even as Draco waved back cheerfully.

"You want to sit by us?" Harry offered.

Draco considered it. "As long as Neville sits on your other side so I won't get into a fight with the Weasel or my father won't freak out because I look like I'm associating with Granger, it should be alright."

"Does your father even know her Hermione is?" Neville asked, curiously. Being a Pureblood himself and rather laidback as a rule, Neville had really never had any problems with Draco after first year

when Draco realized that Neville wasn't the easy target he had initially pegged him for.

"No, but my mother might," Draco confided.

"Do we have to deal with him everywhere?" Ron complained.

"I could go sit over by him if it bothers you," Harry volunteered.

Ginny looked over at Draco's parents, who looked very much like they wanted to inflict bodily harm on Harry. "You know, I think Malfoy will be fine here."

"Mother, Father, I'm going to go sit by the boy who saved us all from You-Know-Who," Draco announced, knowing that as much as his parents might dislike Harry, they couldn't really refuse to let Draco sit by him after he phrased it like that.

Arthur and Lucius spent the rest of the time before the match trading insults while Narcissa reluctantly made small talk with Remus and Tonks. At one point, Sirius came over to explain that the Bulgarian Minister knew English just fine but he never liked Fudge so he was pretending not to speak it to annoy him. The two men were apparently having a grand old time insulting Fudge without anyone but Narcissa being the wiser.

Harry knew the Irish mascots were leprechauns of course, but had forgotten what the Bulgarian one was and so was quite surprised when the field was stormed by Veela.

Draco, Neville, and Ron, Harry noted with some amusement, all stood up and attempted to jump off the balcony and had to be held back by the non-male and/or teenage members of the group.

"God, it's like you've never seen a Veela before," Harry said, shaking his head incredulously.

Ron flushed. "Why weren't you affected?"

"Because I'm not as hormonal?" Harry suggested.

“What?” Ron asked.

“Never mind...”

“Leprechauns!” Arthur exclaimed when it was the Irish’s turn to display their mascots.

“There you go!” Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry’s hand. “For the Omnioculars! Now you’ve got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!” Harry hadn’t wanted to make the Omniocular’s he’d bought Ron and Ginny a substitute Christmas present, but Ron had insisted.

“...You that Leprechaun gold disappears after a couple of hours, right?” Harry pointed out.

“What?” Ron looked upset.

“Yes, they just make it to amuse themselves,” Hermione explained. “It causes all kinds of controversy when people pay in Leprechaun gold and it disappears as no one can really tell if the person who paid in it knew it was Leprechaun gold or if they themselves were also tricked. It’s a good thing that it doesn’t last either, or else think of what inflation would be like...”

“Besides,” Neville added. “Since the gold was everywhere, you can’t really pay him back using something that anyone could pick up off the ground.”

“Looks like you’re back to no Christmas present,” Ginny added, annoyed that Ron had included her in the ‘no present’ deal as she had no problem accepting the ten-galleon gift. Then again, she had a small fortune herself sitting in her own private Gringott’s vault that her family didn’t know about from the basilisk, so maybe that was why.

“Don’t worry, Ron,” Harry hurried to reassure his friend, who was looking more distraught by the second. “Christmas is still four months away; I’ll probably forget by then and get you something anyway.”

"That's not the point!" Ron burst out. "You're always paying for everything!"

"It's because I'm an orphan," Harry explained. "And because I'm not afraid to exploit my fame for all it's worth."

Ron still looked a bit disgruntled, but he quieted down after that.

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The match was interesting enough, if a bit predictable. After all, nothing he had done differently in the past three years did anything to make the Irish team or Krum any worse and so once again the twins' won their bet, though this time they didn't lose their savings and actually made nearly 13 galleons on it. Harry was just happy that he was still able to follow the play without the aid of Omnioculars, which he had been worrying about as it had also been three years since his last high-speed Quidditch match.

Of course, the after-game celebration was cut a bit short as screams and shouts suddenly broke out at the campsite.

"Harry," Arthur burst into Harry's tent. "We've got to go. Kids, you get into the woods, okay. We adults have to take care of this..."

"Geez," Ron grumbled as the adults ran off. "They're making it sound like there's a Death Eater attack or something."

Neville, who was watching two masked wizards levitating a small Muggle child and spinning him like a top with a look of distaste on his face, said, "I know no one here actually believes in Divination – except, perhaps, Harry – but that's two for two, Ron."

"This is really sick..." Ron muttered, shaking his head at the sight, before they all hurried off into the woods.

Suddenly, Ron crashed to the ground. "Ah! Tripped over a tree-root."

"Well, with feet that size, it would be hard not to," Draco drawled from behind them. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along now before they spot you?"

"Are you saying that they're going to be able to 'tell' that Hermione's Muggleborn and so she's in danger?" Harry asked skeptically.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Don't be silly. It's dark, they're drunk, they probably don't know who she is anyway, and nothing about her really screams out 'Muggleborn' until she starts talking. I was more referring to the fact that they'll probably not be opposed to attacking you, given they blame you for the Dark Lord's downfall."

"Oh," Harry said, momentarily taken aback. "That's thoughtful. You really shouldn't call him 'the Dark Lord', though. It makes you sound like a Death Eater."

"You really shouldn't call him by his name," Draco countered. "It makes you sound like an idiot."

"Speaking of Death Eaters," Ron said, glaring at his most hated rival. "Where are your parents? Out there wearing masks?"

Draco just eyed him lazily. "How rude. Potter, how can you be friends with such a heathen?"

"We bonded over candy, remember?" Harry said absently, scanning the skies. Shouldn't the Dark Mark be showing up soon?

By the time the adults came to get them several hours later after everything was safe again, the Dark Mark still hadn't made an appearance. That made Harry uneasy, for reasons he couldn't quite explain. Something told him that something unexpected was happening again, but unlike with Pettigrew, he didn't know what.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Six

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Wow. A guy doesn't want Percy making them tea and all of a sudden they are a violent, insane Death Eater. :p Could happen. Also, every time I try to type 'Daily Prophet' I keep accidentally typing 'Daily Planet'. One of these days that slip is going to get through...

Harry – who had spent the night before his return to Hogwarts at the Burrow so he could go with the Weasleys, Hermione, and Neville – woke up to the familiar sounds of Ron and Hermione bickering. Seriously, why had it taken him so long to realize that those two had unresolved sexual tension up to their ears? Ah, right, the same reason it had taken him six years to realize Ginny liked him: he was oblivious as hell back then.

"If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the Daily Prophet knows how mean he is to elves!" Hermione was saying angrily.

"What are you talking about?" Ron replied, sounding exasperated. "He was very nice to her! He let her stay in his tent during the Match because she was scared of heights and everything!"

"He doesn't PAY Winky," Hermione snapped. "Therefore she's his slave."

"No one pays House Elves, Hermione," Ron retorted. "That's the point of having a House Elf!"

"Harry does," Hermione pointed to him as he came into the room.

"Leave me out of this," Harry requested but went unheeded.

"Yeah, well Harry's not exactly a shining example of normality, is he?" Ron pointed out. "Besides, from what I can tell Dobby's pretty off, too."

"As much as I hate to get involved in your little lover's spat – and believe me, I DO hate to get involved – Ron has a point," Neville said,

presumably drawn to the kitchen by the sound of shouting. “Most House Elves get offended if you try to pay them. They don’t want to be free.”

“So you’re saying it’s alright to enslave an entire race of magical creatures?” Hermione demanded angrily, turning on him.

“I’m not saying anything of the sort,” Neville held up his hands in a placating gesture. “But that’s House Elf mentality. If you gave them all clothes today and forced them to take payment for their work, less people would want them and they would be very unhappy. You want change, you need to change people’s mentality first.”

“Hmph.”

“Besides, since House Elves are always enslaved and Mr. Crouch didn’t seem to be very abusive when you guys met Winky, I don’t anyone – least of all the Daily Prophet – really cares,” Harry pointed out.

“Harry, Mum wanted me to give this to you,” Ginny came up behind him and dumped a parcel into Harry’s hand.

“Oh, um...thanks, I guess,” Harry said, a little confused. “What is it?”

“Mum figured that since you were running around with Sirius all summer you wouldn’t have had time to do your school shopping so she got some gold out of your vault and did it for you,” Ginny explained.

“Why does your mother have access to my Gringott’s vault?” Harry asked immediately.

Ginny shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Seriously, I need to see a list of who’s authorized because really, the only one who should be able to access it is me and, because of my minor status, my godfather,” Harry decided.

Ginny sighed loudly. "Why do you always make everything so difficult? Can't you just be thankful that she got your school supplies for you?"

"I would," Harry admitted. "Except that I already paid Dobby to do it for me."

"Oh," Ginny said. "Well, that's kind of awkward..."

"Oh don't worry," Harry waved it off. "I can just sell them throughout the year to anyone who needs to replace any of their supplies. It will be much faster than Owl Post. And that's really an idea..."

"Well...at least you're making the best of everything," Ginny said doubtfully.

"This means I've got two sets of dress robes..." Harry mused. "I'm only ever actually going to wear one, though...Hey, Ron," he called.

"Yeah?" Ron, who had returned to bickering with Hermione, looked over at him.

"Due to a shopping error, I now have two sets of dress robes. I only need one set. Do you want to borrow my second set?" Harry offered.

Ron made a face. "Harry. You know how I feel about chari-"

"Laundry!" Mrs. Weasley announced, walking into the room and handing robes to the occupants.

"Mum, you gave me Ginny's new dress," Ron said, holding a long, maroon velvet dress robe with a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs out to her. Harry wondered vaguely why Molly always tried to make Ron wear maroon. It wasn't like she didn't have the exact same hair color; surely she realized he looked horrible in it by now? Was the maroon really the only color available on sale? Couldn't she use a spell to change the color?

Ginny snorted. "Please. I wouldn't be caught dead in that."

"Then what-?" Ron began, eying the dress robes nervously.

"Ginny!" Molly scolded. "Those are your new dress robes, of course."

"Right," Ron nodded. "Harry, is your offer still open?"

"The offer I made two minutes ago?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Of course."

"Great," Ron looked relieved.

"What offer is this?" Molly asked curiously.

"Harry's lending me his spare set of dress robes for...whatever we need dress robes for," Ron explained.

Molly's mouth became a thin line. "He most certainly is not. You are going to wear these dress robes and you are going to like it, young man!"

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry cut in hesitantly, hoping the Weasley matron wasn't about to bite his head off.

"Yes, Harry dear?" she asked warmly.

"I really don't need two sets but I currently have them. If I don't let Ron use them than chances are I'll just end up giving them to Dobby and they're too big for him to have any real use for, so he'll probably cut it up and use it as a cleaning cloth and this material is far too nice for that," Harry said earnestly.

"Well..." Molly looked like she was relenting.

"Besides, you should see Ginny's robes," Ron pointed to his sister's very pretty royal blue dress robes.

"Ginevra," Molly gasped. "Where did you-"

Ginny shot a glare at her brother. "There was a sale going on," she lied, still refusing to admit she had money for fear her parents would

try and make her wait until she was of age to access it so she'd be responsible with it. Well she didn't want to be responsible, she wanted to get out of wearing maroon to...whatever they needed dress robes for.

"We WILL talk about this later, young lady," Molly promised as she swept out of the room.

Ginny snorted. "When? I'm going back to Hogwarts tomorrow."

"She is really scary," Hermione said quietly.

"Oh, are you two still in the room?" Harry asked, looking over at her and Neville. "Why haven't you said anything for the past ten minutes?"

"We know better than to invoke the famous Weasley temper," Neville explained. "You know, she really reminds me of my Gran sometimes...except more maternal."

"Famous Weasley temper?" Harry repeated incredulously. As his four friends nodded, he started laughing. "Guys, Mr. Weasley is one of the most even-tempered people I've ever met. The one with the temper is Mrs. Weasley and she's a Prewett, so wouldn't it be the famous Prewett temper?"

"I...guess," Neville conceded, looking like he couldn't care less.

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At Platform 9¾ the next day, Bill and Charlie were having great fun teasing their younger siblings. Except for Percy, who was too busy trying to be a responsible adult and actually working. Clearly this is a sign that Percy hates his family and is just looking for an excuse to throw them over.

"I might be seeing you all sooner than you think," Charlie said, grinning, as he hugged Ginny goodbye.

"Why?" Fred asked keenly.

"Are you going to be in Britain for Christmas?" Harry asked innocently.

"...Let's go with that," Charlie replied. "After all, if it were for any other reason at all, I wouldn't be supposed to say as it's...what was it... 'classified information until such time the Ministry sees fit to release it.'"

"Kind of makes you wonder, really, why in the world it's such a big secret. I mean, anyone even vaguely connected with the Ministry knows but the Hogwarts students can't?" Harry complained.

Charlie eyed him curiously. "How do you know—"

"I know everything," Harry said seriously.

"I thought that was your scar," Hermione said.

"My scar is a part of me," Harry shrugged.

"Really, because when you were claiming that you weren't psychic earlier—" Hermione began.

"Stop nitpicking," Harry told her, ignoring her outraged gasp and turning back towards the adult Weasley boys.

"So you know why I sort of wish I was back at Hogwarts this year," Bill said, looking almost wistful.

"WHY?" George asked impatiently.

"Probably because being an adult sucks," Harry guessed. "Although since he's a travelling curse breaker I don't see why he'd want to go back to Snap-er, exams."

"You guys are going to have an interesting year," Bill defended. "I might even get some time off to come and watch a bit of it."

"A bit of what?" Ron demanded.

Neville shrugged. "Who knows? Every year Harry has is pretty interesting and since no one actually tried to kill Harry last year – except possibly Professor Snape for giving Sirius ideas – this year should be twice as deadly."

"How does that even work?" Ginny asked quizzically.

"It's Harry," Neville said, as if that explained everything. Which it kind of did.

"Thanks for having us stay, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said.

"Yeah, thanks for everything," Neville added.

"Oh, it was my pleasure, dears," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh, sure it's her pleasure when it's Ron's friends," Fred muttered.

"But when WE want to have people over it's always 'we'll see'," George added.

"Or when I want to have friends over it's 'Ron's friends are around your age' or 'Luna lives right over the hill'," Ginny contributed. The twins glared at her for breaking their rhythm. "Sorry."

"It's blatant favoritism, that's what it is," Fred sniffed.

"Too right, Fred," George agreed.

"No, it's because last time Lee Jordan came to visit you blew up the house," corrected Mrs. Weasley.

"We only blew it up a LITTLE," Fred insisted.

"And it's not like you didn't fix it in five minutes anyway," George finished.

"Anyway," Mrs. Weasley sighed. "I'd invite you all for Christmas, but...well, I expect you're all going to want to stay at Hogwarts, what with...one thing and another."

"Oh come on!" Ron moaned as they went to go find a compartment. "Mum knows, too? She's not even in the Ministry! Can't you just tell me what it is, Harry?"

"I could," Harry agreed. "But I don't want to."

"You're not letting them know about the Triwizard Tournament?" Luna's ethereal voice came from behind them.

"Nope," Harry said cheerfully.

"What's a Triwizard Tournament?" Hermione asked, looking a bit irritated not to know when clearly everyone else did.

"It's a competition that was established seven hundred years ago between Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A representative from each school is chosen and the three champions compete in three magical tasks. Every five years, the schools took turns hosting the Tournament. Several centuries ago, however, the death toll got to be too high and they cancelled it," Neville explained.

"Death toll?" Hermione asked, horrified.

"Well, duh, Hermione," Ron said. "Think how easy it is to nearly die just by going to Hogwarts even WITHOUT the extra danger thrown in."

"That's awful," Hermione whispered. "It's a good thing they cancelled it."

"Didn't you hear Luna?" Harry asked. "They're reinstating it."

"I'm sure Dumbledore has more sense than that," Hermione said skeptically.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Harry muttered.

"It's okay, Harry," Luna told him. "One of these days the power of our insanity will prove to be too much for her and she'll HAVE to believe."

"I know," Harry nodded. "I just wish that day was today."

"...Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defense rubbish we do," Draco was saying as he entered their compartment, followed by his two faithful stooges. "Mother put her foot down though and said no son of hers would ever be caught dead in a Durmstrang uniform. I can kind of see her point, I'll admit. I mean, who wears fur nowadays, really? Still...think of how much fun I could have learning all sorts of Dark spells..."

"So you think Durmstrang would have suited you, do you?" Hermione said angrily. "I wish you HAD gone, then we wouldn't have to put up with you."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Claws out today, Granger? Are you just sore Durmstrang doesn't accept Muggleborns?"

"No," Hermione denied. "Durmstrang has a horrible reputation! According to Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts."

"That's not exactly a horrible reputation," Neville pointed out. "Although the no Muggleborn policy does draw some criticism from the more moderate factions of wizarding society."

"So...going to enter, Weasley?" Draco asked, bored with the discussion of the school he'd chosen not to go to. "Going to try to earn a bit of money so you don't have to make Potter buy you everything?"

"Enter what?" Ron asked blankly.

"You don't know?" Draco looked amused. "Your dad and three of your brothers are involved, how can you not KNOW? What about you, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, after all."

Harry shrugged. "Probably. I heard they're using an age line to keep anyone under the age of seventeen out, but I'm not exactly going to

let that stop me. And as for why they don't know...Luna tried to tell them, but they don't believe her. Which is strange because she's right more often than not..."

"It's because what I say sounds strange," Luna explained. "And to quote my favorite cricket player, 'in an insane world the sane appear insane.'"

"How do you know about the Tournament?" Ginny demanded.

"Wait, you believe Luna and Harry?" Ron asked in disbelief.

Ginny nodded. "I've known Luna for years and everyone knows that the crazier the things that come out of Harry's mouth are, the more accurate they get."

"Point," Neville acknowledged.

"Oh, my father found out about it ages ago," Draco said airily. "He heard about it from Cornelius Fudge."

"That's against the rules because it's supposed to be secret until the time comes for it to be revealed!" Hermione protested. "So what your father did, Malfoy, is wrong!"

Draco stared at her. "Do you honestly expect me to care or something?"

"You should," Hermione said defiantly.

Draco laughed. "My father was accused of being a Death Eater after the Dark Lord fell and that accusation keeps coming up every time someone doesn't like him. As a wealthy, powerful Pureblood lots of people don't like him. When compared to having your father accused of being a terrorist, do you really think it matters in the slightest if he told me about some stupid tournament a few weeks in advance?"

"...It should," Hermione repeated.

"Whatever," Draco shook his head, leaving the compartment, Crabbe and Goyle following silently behind him.

"Do you think Goyle even knows how to talk?" Harry asked idly.

"What about Crabbe?" Ron asked. "I always thought he looked stupider."

"He may not be the brightest guy around," Harry conceded, remembering how he'd managed to kill himself with Fiendfyre he really shouldn't have been casting in the first place. "But he's not THAT stupid."

"Your scar again?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"Maybe," Harry muttered.

"Hey Luna," Ginny asked suddenly. "Do you believe in Harry's psychic scar?"

"Oh no," the blonde girl shook her head.

"Then how do you explain how he always knows everything?" Neville inquired.

Luna blinked. "He's obviously from the future."

Hermione stared at her for half a second before bursting out laughing. "That's even less likely than his scar being semi-sentient."

"Which it totally is," Harry managed to say truthfully, since it was a Horcrux and whatnot, while staring at Luna speculatively.

"What makes you say that?" Ginny wanted to know.

"Well, how else would you explain it?" Luna asked reasonably.

Note: Yeah, I know Harry (and the author) loves Mrs. Weasley, but to me she's always come off as overbearing and a bit smothering, always trying to control her children's lives even when they're adults

and keeping important information away from them because they 'shouldn't have to' deal with it. Shouldn't have to, maybe, but DO. Naturally, this is kind of annoying to someone who kind of outgrew the need for a surrogate mother like Future Harry. Oh, and belief in a Tabloid author over her son's best friend and hostility towards Hermione to the point where Harry was forced to call her on it was ridiculous, too. But then, I'm one of those who would have rather seen Augusta Longbottom take down Bellatrix because she actually had some personal beef with her instead of just 'oh, my daughter is in a battle and someone's trying to hurt her, that bitch must die!'

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: Wow, there were a lot of pissed anti-Ron/Hermione fans complaining Harry referred to their constant bickering as unresolved sexual tension. Harry's problem is that since he ended up with Ginny in the future, Ron with Hermione, Neville with Hannah, ect. Is that he just assumes it's going to happen again. He knows he'll have to put some effort into getting Ginny, but everything else will sort itself out the way it was before, ignoring any changes he might make. It's like someone looking back on Lily and James and saying that Lily had liked him for awhile but waited until he was less arrogant to go out with him. It may or may not be true, but since the end result is marriage and kids, that's what he's going to assume. Besides, it was just one comment from someone who expects them to hook up in the future, not an in-depth pro-Ron/Hermione argument. Neville calling it a lover's spat was just trying to embarrass them so they'd shut up.

Other note: Hey, last week this story totally made it to the one-year mark! Wow, I honestly thought I would have gotten bored by this point and quit...Miracles happen, I guess. :p

"So, you're Dennis Creevey then?" Harry asked politely, looking at Colin's younger brother. The small boy had never really forgiven him for Colin's death since – according to him – Colin wouldn't have snuck back into Hogwarts in the first place if it hadn't been Harry's decision to have the battle. Harry wasn't entirely sure about that, but since he'd mostly ignored Colin due to sheer annoyance and he had so obviously idolized him, there was some lingering guilt there. He had already made the effort to be nicer to Colin himself but he figured it wouldn't hurt to do some work with Dennis, either.

"Uh-huh," Dennis confirmed, nodding excitedly. "I fell off the boat on the way up here and Colin said the giant squid pushed me back in! Isn't that awesome?"

"That is quite a story," Harry conceded. "Of course, my own boat ride was on a nice, calm night without any near-drownings and I think it would have been a much pleasanter experience, but I can't really tell

people about it because they don't care. You, however, can use your story to terrify all the little first years for the next six years."

Dennis' eyes widened in anticipation. "Awesome!"

"This is Harry Potter, Dennis," Colin introduced reverently. "He's probably insane, but really cool. If you ever get really bored, go find him and something exciting is sure to follow."

It was, Harry reflected as he moved back to his own seat, better than being sought out because of his evil facial disfigurement.

"I do hope this year's batch of Gryffindors are up to scratch," Nearly Headless Nick remarked idly. "We don't want to break our winning streak, do we?" He paused. "Of course, that's not bloody likely with Harry here, but it wouldn't do to get overconfident, would it?"

"I just want you to know that I really hate you right now," Harry glared at the insensitive ghost, who looked remarkably unconcerned. If looks could petrify, though...

The opening feast was, of course, fantastic and Harry was fully engrossed in it when he heard Hermione horror-struck screech. Alarmed, Harry's head shot up in time to hear her say, "There are house-elves here? Here at Hogwarts?"

"Certainly," Nick said, looking surprised at her reaction. "The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred."

"I've never seen one!" said Hermione.

"Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?" said Nearly Headless Nick. "They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning ... see to the fires and so on ... I mean, you're not supposed to see them, are you? That's the mark of a good house-elf, isn't it, that you don't know it's there?"

Hermione stared at him. "But they get paid?" she said. "They get holidays, don't they? And - and sick leave, and pensions and everything?"

Neville was beginning to look a little pale. "Careful Hermione. What you're talking about sounds suspiciously like a union."

Hermione looked a little confused as to why that was a bad thing before she remembered the poor boy's Boggart. "Oh, sorry," she said apologetically. "But don't they get some kind of compensation for their work?"

"They get more work and accommodations," Ginny replied. "And they really don't want anything else."

"Dobby does," Hermione insisted.

"And Dobby gets paid," Ron pointed out.

Hermione looked down at her mostly untouched plate of food, then pushed it away from her in disgust. "I will not be a part of this slave labor," she announced.

"You know, you really didn't seem to have a problem with the Weasley's House Elf when you stayed with them over the summer," Harry pointed out. "Or did you import all your meals?"

Hermione flushed. "That's different."

"How?" Ron asked.

"I know that your mother treats Slinky kindly and she's always so happy," Hermione replied.

Knowing it would only make an annoying situation worse, Harry wisely resisted the urge to point out that Slinky's happiness could very well just be a sign of a thorough indoctrination and Slinky didn't know any better. Instead he asked, "You really think Mrs. Weasley treats House Elves better than Professor Dumbledore? Seriously, he hired Dobby for real wages and he was willing to pay quite a bit more than Dobby was willing to accept, so he had to talk him down. If the other Elves wanted it, they could get the same deal."

Hermione sniffed. "Just because none of you care about social justice—"

"We talked about this, remember?" Harry interrupted. "Baby steps. Going on a hunger strike won't make the House Elves want freedom any quicker and pushing for immediate emancipation would just freak them out. Instead, you should try studying the laws and policies regarding them and work towards outlawing House Elf corporal punishment," he suggested.

"Fine," Hermione snapped, realizing that Harry had a good point and reluctantly picking her fork back up. "But for the record, I am NOT happy about this."

Soon, Dumbledore stood up and Harry automatically tuned out the list of rules and tedious announcements.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the inter-house Quidditch Cup will not take place this year," Dumbledore was saying when Harry finally tuned back in.

"What?" Harry burst out loudly. As everyone turned to stare at him, he figured he might as well go for broke. "But my scar said that the Quidditch Pitch shouldn't be occupied until around March or so! Surely the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students coming in for the Triwizard Tournament aren't demanding we cancel our ONE sport. I mean, for God sakes Krum is a professional Quidditch player!"

There was a shocked silence, then an outbreak of whispers.

Neville groaned. "Harry Potter: Thunder Stealer."

Harry snorted. "You want to talk about thunder stealers? What about him?" he pointed to the door, which immediately flung open, revealing what appeared to be Alastor Moody.

Harry quietly nudged the twins, who were sitting a few seats down from him. "Hey," he whispered. "I'm feeling mildly paranoid. Can you do me a favor and make sure that's really him?"

Fred and George exchanged looks and shrugged. Fred pulled out the Marauder's Map under the table, muttered the password, and examined it for a moment before wiping it clean again. "Yeah, that's him. Alastor Moody."

"Damn," Harry swore.

George raised his eyebrows. "That's...a bad thing?"

Harry shook his head. "It's unexpected."

"We like unexpected," Fred told him.

"Well I don't," Harry said frankly. "I prefer my chaos to be organized."

"That's such a contradiction of terms," George said, shaking his head sadly.

"He might be onto something, though," Fred mused thoughtfully.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Moody," Dumbledore said brightly. He paused for a moment. "And yes, Hogwarts does have the pleasure of hosting the Triwizard Tournament this year. So thoughtful of Mr. Potter to inform us all..."

If it had been anyone else, Harry would have bet that the old Headmaster would have been annoyed. Seeing as it was him, however...Dumbledore honestly seemed to think he was being considerate

Typical.

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"Age line?" Fred moaned. "What does he MEAN there's an age line?"

"It's for our own good, really," Angelina told him, smirking.

He glared at her. "You're only saying that because you're already seventeen."

Angelina crossed her arms unrepentantly.

"There's got to be a way to beat the age line," George insisted. "We've just got to find it."

"I know how to get past it," Harry spoke up. "And I plan on entering." After all, he reasoned, there was still a chance he would be entered since the Third Task was such a perfect kidnapping opportunity (he didn't think he'd changed anything as far as the Tournament itself was concerned and the Third Task was traditionally a maze of some sort anyway) so he might as well do it willingly. And since an Aging Potion wouldn't fool the Age Line as it could tell how old you really were, it should be able to tell he was in his twenties and let him by no problem. Obviously they hadn't thought to do anything to stop people of age from entering people who weren't, but then he supposed that since most people who could enter would, they wouldn't want to lessen their chances by adding more applicants. Now he only had a month to figure out how to trick the Goblet into believing there was a fourth – or fifth, depending on whether one of Voldemort's followers still struck – school. Wouldn't that piss everyone off, though, having three Hogwarts champions versus one Beauxbatons and one Durmstrang contestant. He vaguely hoped it wouldn't start an international incident. If it did...oh well. Better than a Voldemort incident.

"You do?" Fred asked, a little skeptical.

"How?" George demanded.

Harry smirked. "Now, now. That would be telling. For five Galleons I'll be willing to enter anyone who wants me to. Spread the word."

--

Harry always welcomed the chance to hone his BS abilities and so was quite looking forward to his first Divination class. Hermione had dropped at the end of last year, of course, but since she was still

taking Muggle Studies, the two of them were still using a Time Turner to get to their one class more than everyone else was taking.

“Good day,” Professor Trelawney greeted them ethereally. She turned to Harry, who was her favorite pupil. Well, she probably would have liked Luna, but the Ravenclaw had opted against taking Divination as she felt that the class would be too structured for such a mysterious phenomena as the Inner Eye. “You are preoccupied, my dear,” she said mournfully. “My Inner Eye sees past your brave face to the troubled soul within. And I regret to say that your worries are not baseless. I see difficult times ahead for you, alas … most difficult … I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass … and perhaps sooner than you think …”

“I know,” Harry agreed sadly. “I just heard that Ludo Bagman is going to be a judge in the Triwizard Tournament and he’s bet the goblins that I’ll win.”

“You aren’t even entered,” pointed out Neville.

“Bagman got a great deal,” Harry shrugged.

“So…about that whole ‘you’ll enter anyone’ thing…can you get me in the Tournament?” Ron asked hopefully.

“I can get you into the running,” Harry confirmed. “As long as Hermione doesn’t find out, because I don’t want to have to deal with her complaining that I’m ‘cheating’ or some other such nonsense until afterwards.” He shuddered. “She might even…tell on me.”

“Uncool,” Ron agreed. “So I’ll get you the five galleons by next month and don’t even THINK about trying to give me a ‘best friends discount’ because I already owe you enough.”

“Alright,” Harry agreed. “Neville?”

The other boy snorted. “Please. Why would I want to go up against the finest Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang has to offer?”

“Because you’re stupid?” Harry suggested.

Neville glared at him.

"Oh, I didn't mean you, per se," Harry backtracked hurriedly. "I just meant, that's why everyone who's not a sixth year who just barely missed the cut off like the twins wants to enter. They just want the prize money, and maybe the fame. They're not thinking about the competing against the best of the best and the chance they could die."

"Am I right in saying, my dear, that you were born in mid-winter?" Trelawney's voice cut through their conversation.

"Well..." Harry trailed off. "I, personally, was born in July. My scar, however, was born on December 31st."

"I thought your scar was born on Halloween," Lavender said, puzzled.

"Oh, no," Harry corrected. "That's just when I got it."

"And that' not when it was born?" Dean raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"No, it was born on New Year's Eve," Harry repeated, annoyed.
"Don't you people listen?"

"We do," Parvati assured him. "You just make no sense."

"What's not to get?" Harry demanded. "My scar was born on New Year's Eve and I got it on Halloween. Seems simple enough."

"You know what?" Seamus asked. "Never mind. This will not be worth it, I can tell."

"Spoilsport," Harry muttered bitterly.

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"I can't believe we have so much homework," Ron complained. "Just because Trelawney can't take a joke..."

"You told Lavender you wanted to see her anus," pointed out Neville.
"What did you expect?"

Hermione, who had been shoveling food into her mouth as quickly as possible, looked up sharply. "He said WHAT?"

"Oh, don't you start," Ron said irritably. "She already hexed me for it."

"It's no less than you deserve," Harry told him frankly. "You know, in the Muggle World that would be considered sexual harassment and you could get into all sorts of legal trouble."

"It was a JOKE!" Ron cried.

"It was a stupid one," Neville said bluntly. "And Ginny heard about it from Parvati, so she's out for your blood as well."

"Oh dear God..." Ron groaned, burying his head in his arms.

"I've got to run," Hermione said, standing up. "I'm going to the library."

"I thought you didn't have any homework," Neville said, surprised.

"I don't. This is for...something else," Hermione said evasively, heading towards the exit.

"Hermione, I should probably warn you that I trademarked SPEW over the summer," Harry called after her.

She stopped, looking a little disappointed. "You did? Why?"

"I started a Grammar Nazi organization. Stop People Abusing Words," Harry explained.

"That would be SPAW, now SPEW," Hermione pointed out.

"I spelled 'Abusing' with an E," Harry grinned. "It seemed ironic."

"And...this went over well with the Grammar Nazis?" Hermione couldn't believe it.

Harry shrugged. "It has the Harry Potter name attached to it; why wouldn't it?"

Hermione just shook her head and stormed off.

No sooner had she left than Fred, George, and Lee Jordan descended upon them.

"Moody! How cool is he?" Fred asked.

"And still Moody, we checked," George added.

"We had him this afternoon," Lee told Harry, Ron, and Neville.

"What was he like?" Harry asked, honestly curious. He'd never had Moody as a teacher, after all, but Crouch was pretty good and he wanted to know how similar the two teaching styles were.

The three older boys exchanged a look full of meaning.

"Never had a lesson like it," said Fred mysteriously.

"He KNOWs, man," said Lee.

"He knows what it's like to be out there doing it," George said, his voice awe-filled.

"He's see it all," said Fred.

"Amazing," Lee concluded.

"So...he started a cult, then?" Harry asked innocently.

Review Please!

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Note: By Harry's scar being born on the 31st of December, I meant that the scar is a Horcrux and Riddle was born then. Also, I was looking over Book Four when I was writing this and I noticed that Ron and Harry seemed to think Snape having 'seemed to have attained new levels of vindictiveness over the summer' was because he didn't get the DADA job again. Uh, hello? Sirius escaped from right under his nose right after exams and he can't even say anything because Dumbledore helped him. How do they not realize that's going to cause some bitterness? And that's not even counting the fact it's Moody (or supposed to be) since they have no way of knowing of Snape's...legal troubles... at that point.

Harry might have been looking forward to Actual Moody's first class – and he knew it was still Actual Moody as he had had the twins check just that morning. He was having them check so often in fact that they started getting a little annoyed and so he started paying them every time they did so. Naturally, they took that to mean 'seek Harry out at every available opportunity and assure him that Moody is Moody', but Harry didn't care. The twins needed the money for their awesometastic future joke shop. Anyway, Harry might have been excited, but not excited enough to actually show up early. Unlike the rest of the class. Even Hermione had had Neville and Ron drag her out of the library so she could stand outside the classroom in anticipation.

Harry actually showed up after Moody did, but before the bell had rung. His friends looked disappointed at his apparent apathy and made him sit in the front with them as punishment. Okay, maybe they didn't view it as punishment, but he was a normal teenager – well, sort of. Not at all, actually, but it was the thought that counted – and as such sitting in the front was never, ever something he wanted to do.

"I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark—" Moody was explaining when Ron so very rudely interrupted.

"What, aren't you staying?" he blurted, sounding upset. Harry wondered about that. They hadn't even been in his class for two minutes and Ron already wanted him to be their teacher forever? Then again, if the stories he'd been hearing about Moody's class all week (all vague, of course) were any indication, Moody knew his way around publicity too.

Moody shot Ron an 'are you stupid?' look but managed to restrain himself from making the biting comment that he so very clearly wanted to. "Does anybody want to answer that?"

Harry started to raise his hand, but Neville beat him to it. "Didn't Voldemort put some sort of curse on the position because he threw a hissy fit after Dumbledore realized he was evil and didn't give him the job? That's what Professor Black said."

"...I knew that..." Ron lied. Harry was rather impressed that even though Ron might have been the only one of the eight Gryffindors in their year not to get the fifty points Sirius promised for saying 'Voldemort', everyone else now used that name with such regularity that Ron had stopped twitching some time in early December.

Moody looked amused. "Sirius always was too reckless for his own good...Yes, Voldemort did indeed curse the position some forty years ago. Seeing as the curse was successfully thwarted for the past two years by people voluntarily leaving and having a one-year contract, I also plan to stay for only a year. I may come back in a few years if retirement proves to be too dull, but you'll be out of school by then so it won't matter."

"Are we going to get the Imperius Curse cast on us?" Harry asked curious.

Moody looked at him suspiciously. "How did you know that? Have you been talking to the other classes? Because if I found out they ruined this for you-"

"Oh, no," Harry assured him. "It's just that from what I can tell, surviving the Avada Kedavra gives you a psychic scar." He was a bit

surprised the lesson would be the same. Then again, he supposed that gave credit to Crouch's acting skills the first time around.

"And he's made a career of stealing other people's thunder," Neville added helpfully.

"Is that so?" Moody looked as skeptical as everyone did when hearing that for the first time. Well, more skeptical of what Harry had said than what Neville dd.

Harry shrugged. "Find me another survivor to prove me wrong."

"You know two of the three Unforgiveable Curses; do you know the third as well?" Moody asked him.

"The Cruciatus Curse," Harry said shortly. "Nasty piece of work, that, and it will leave you shaking for hours." Seeing everyone's curious glances, he quickly added, "And no, I'm not going to discuss my experience with it, nor do I feel up to explaining what those are to those who have somehow managed to go at least four years in the wizarding world without learning the three curses that will earn you a one-way ticket to Azkaban for using...in most circumstances."

Harry only half-listened as Ron, Neville, and then Parvati explained what the three curses actually did and Moody demonstrated. The dead spider was disturbing, the tortured spider was giving him flashbacks, and the tap-dancing spider was mildly amusing, but mostly horrifying.

Harry didn't think Neville looked nearly as bad as he had the first time he saw the giant spider being tortured, but he still looked really pale and was trembling slightly. Harry shot him a reassuring smile, which the other boy weakly returned. Being confronted with a visual reminder of his parents' fate would never be easy for him.

"For the record," Harry said, as no one else seemed inclined to break the uneasy silence that had descended upon them. "I would like to say to everyone who thought I was making up that my Boggart fear of green light was actually the Avada Kedavra...I SO told you so."

"Right," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Because you're just a bastion of truthfulness who has never once given us any reason to doubt you, ever."

"I'm glad you've finally come to realize that, Hermione," Harry beamed at her.

"Um, Harry?" Ron said. "I think she was being sarcastic."

Harry sighed and shook his head sadly. "You've come a long way in your quest to correctly identify sarcasm, young grasshopper, but you've still got a long way to go."

Ron just blinked stupidly at Harry. "...Did you just call me a grasshopper?"

"Oh, never mind..."

"CONSTNAT VIGILANCE!" Moody suddenly screamed out. Everyone but Harry – who had experienced it before – jumped about a foot. "You see, if mere shouting can cause such an extreme reaction, than you are clearly completely unprepared for the world of combat."

"But...we're at peace," Lavender pointed out hesitantly.

Moody smiled knowingly. "We're always at peace...until war breaks out. The Dark Side rarely gives us advanced notice before attacking."

Harry wisely turned his laughter at the most likely inadvertent Star Wars reference into a coughing fit, but Moody still eyed him suspiciously. Then again, seeing as how this was Moody and Harry was hiding something, he figured he might well get used to it.

The class ended without Moody using the Imperius on them. Since Moody confirmed that he would be using it on them, Harry couldn't figure out if it was because he was mad that Harry had, as Neville so aptly put it, 'stolen his thunder' or if the lecture on the Unforgivable was a different lesson than the practical.

Since Neville still looked upset and Harry knew exactly why but that Neville didn't exactly want people to know, Harry suggested they head outside and they spent a very relaxing rest of the afternoon down by the lake.

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That night, Harry, Ron, and Neville finally got around to doing that extra Divination homework Ron had gotten them. Ron and Neville were making things up haphazardly but Harry was putting some real effort into his...or so he thought.

"Harry, you've got 'I will be besieged by the stupidity of the general population' four times this month," Ron pointed out.

"Really?" Harry said mildly. "Only four times? This must be a good month, then."

"You're not supposed to do repeat fates," Neville reminded him.

"Oh, Professor Trelawney will understand," Harry said airily. "She faces the same problem in regards to Divination, you know."

"You've been going here for four years now and you're STILL taking issue with the fact no one else can keep up with your insanity?" Neville was incredulous. "Well...except for Luna, of course."

Harry shrugged. "Apparently so. Or so my scar insists and I know better than to doubt it by now."

"Hey, what are Fred and George doing?" Ron asked, thoroughly bored by the assignment. Harry didn't think it would be taking the other boy nearly as long as it was if he stopped making every day so damn epic. If Ron's month got any MORE tragic than their Professor might just decide that Ron was the student destined to die young from their year that she had somehow missed because he was being overshadowed by Harry - as per usual. Ron, superstitious as he was, would probably believe her and then they'd have to endure weeks and months of him bemoaning his fate until he might very well die...from being strangled to death by his irate friends.

Harry glanced over at the twins, who appeared to be plotting. “I’m guessing they’re planning their future business. Interrupt them at your own risk.”

“No thanks, I’m good here,” Ron said quickly.

Neville snorted. “Finally, he shows some survival instincts!”

“Be fair,” Harry deadpanned. “He’s lived with them all his life. It’s more twin instincts than anything.”

“True,” Neville agreed solemnly.

“Hey!” Ron protested.

“I’m finished!” Hermione announced, bounding into the Common Room. She glanced at Ron’s paper. “You appear to be drowning twice.”

“It’s a good thing Dean’s a qualified lifeguard then,” Ron said amiably. “Still...you’d think I’d learn after the first time...”

“Don’t you think it’s obvious you made this up?” Hermione asked.

“Way to judge, Hermione,” Harry huffed. “Just because you couldn’t last a year in the class doesn’t mean you should belittle those of us with actual talent.”

Hermione glared at him. “By your own admission, you have no talent in the class.”

“Ron does,” Harry countered.

“So, Hermione, what’s in the box?” Neville inquired quickly, preventing a full-blown argument.

“Funny you should ask,” Hermione said, glaring at Harry. She took off the lid and revealed the horribly familiar sight of fifty or so multi-colored SPEW badges. Only they didn’t say SPEW, obviously, since

Harry had trademarked it. He should have known better than to hope that that alone was enough to stop Hermione crusade on behalf of House Elves.

“SHOE?” Ron asked, confused.

“Stop Hurting Our Elves,” Hermione beamed. “You like it?”

“Hermione, no one’s going to take an organization called SHOE seriously,” Neville said frankly.

“It’s not ‘shoe’, it S-H-O-E,” Hermione corrected.

“Yeah, people aren’t going to care,” Harry told her. “It’s easier to just say ‘shoe’.”

Harry didn’t really care what scheme Hermione had cooked up to do this and figured he could always get a recap from Neville later.

“So...will you join?” Hermione looked so hopeful that he almost said yes. Then he remembered just how annoying SPEW had been and how crazy and idealistic the issue of House Elf rights made Hermione.

“Can I just make a donation?” Harry asked instead.

Hermione blinked. “A donation? Why?”

“Tax cut,” Harry said simply.

Ron groaned. “AGAIN with the tax cuts? Are you obsessed or something?”

“Of course not!” Harry denied, highly affronted. “But seeing as how I’m the only one of us that actually has to pay taxes, I’m the only one who understands that every little bit counts. I won’t get to make SHOE a deduction if I’m a member because then it will look like it’s my own self-interest.”

“You could just hire someone to do your taxes for you,” Hermione pointed out. “That’s what my parents do.”

"Ah," Harry smiled. "I could. But I find better loopholes."

"I'm sure you do," Neville said absently. "Now, what would membership of this 'shoe' require us to do? Because I draw the line at bake sales."

Hermione nodded. "That's fair. How do you feel about knitting?"

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Soon came the Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that Harry had been looking forward to: the chance to purportedly be completely immune to the Imperius Curse on the first try. Granted, it had really taken him four, but that sounded much less badass.

"Isn't that illegal?" Hermione protested. "I could have sworn someone said something about it being a one-way ticket to Azkaban."

"Wizarding Laws don't really apply to Dumbledore," Harry explained. "I mean, what are they going to do? ARREST him?" He snorted, remembering when the Ministry had tried exactly that. "Good luck."

"While I wouldn't quite go that far," Moody said neutrally. "It's true that no one really wants to nitpick Dumbledore's every action."

"NITPICK?" Hermione couldn't believe it. "This isn't nitpicking, this is a curse that's apparently on the same level as brutally torturing someone and as automatically killing them and we can't just-"

"Besides," Moody interrupted her. "If you do not wish to do this lesson, the door is that way. Just don't be surprised if a Dark Wizard uses it on you and you're completely and totally unprepared and helpless to resist. It's not always used by Death Eaters, you know. Oftentimes it's used for less obvious evil and in conjunction with an Oblivious."

Gulping, Hermione stayed seated.

Harry watched impassively as his classmates were all rendered helpless under the Imperius Curse's effects. The actions they were

doing – imitating a squirrel, hopping around the classroom singing the national anthem, doing some rather impressive gymnastics, etc – were in and of themselves rather amusing. The underlying implication that his friends and classmates would be utterly defenseless against a Dark Wizard or even just a morally-challenged one was not. Finally, it was Harry's turn.

"Potter," Moody growled. "You're next."

Harry calmly moved forward to the middle of the classroom.

Moody raised his wand and pointed it in Harry's general direction. "Imperio."

Harry felt the effects of the curse, of course, that blissful, floating feeling. Still, over the years he'd been under it so much – in fact, after the Second War ended Auror training mandated being put under the Imperius curse until you successfully fight it off and Harry had been put under a few times just to prove that he already could – that he barely noticed the effects.

Jump on the desk.

Harry sighed theatrically. "You know, I would, I really would. In fact, under normal circumstances I think it would be a great homage to 'Dead Poets Society.' Just the same, I cannot – as a matter of principle – obey any command I receive while under the Imperius Curse. It just wouldn't be right."

"Does that mean Harry's fighting off the Curse?" Hermione wondered.

"Maybe Moody's just getting creative," Ron suggested.

"Of COURSE Harry managed to be immune," Neville groaned. "Is anyone honestly surprised?"

No one said anything.

"Impressive, very impressive. Until yesterday I could honestly say I'd never seen someone so resistant to the Imperius Curse before," Moody said thoughtfully.

"What happened yesterday?" Seamus asked.

Moody smiled. "Yesterday I had the third year Ravenclaws and one Miss Luna Lovegood didn't even notice I put the Curse on her."

"That sounds about right," Dean agreed.

"I am so proud," Harry gushed. "Luna's great."

"That's all the time we have for today," Moody announced. "Even though no one but Potter managed to beat the Imperius on their first try, repeated usage develops a natural resistance in everyone so if anyone wants to work with me to build up a resistance, stay after class and we'll work out a schedule."

Needless to say, Harry went down to dinner alone.

Note: Next chapter the other schools arrive! Finally! And Harry actually remembers he has a godfather! Sadly, though, it doesn't look like anything in this world can stop Hermione's House Elf Crusade...

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